

Mike Martz & the 49ers (OK, genius, now what?)



Sporting News

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

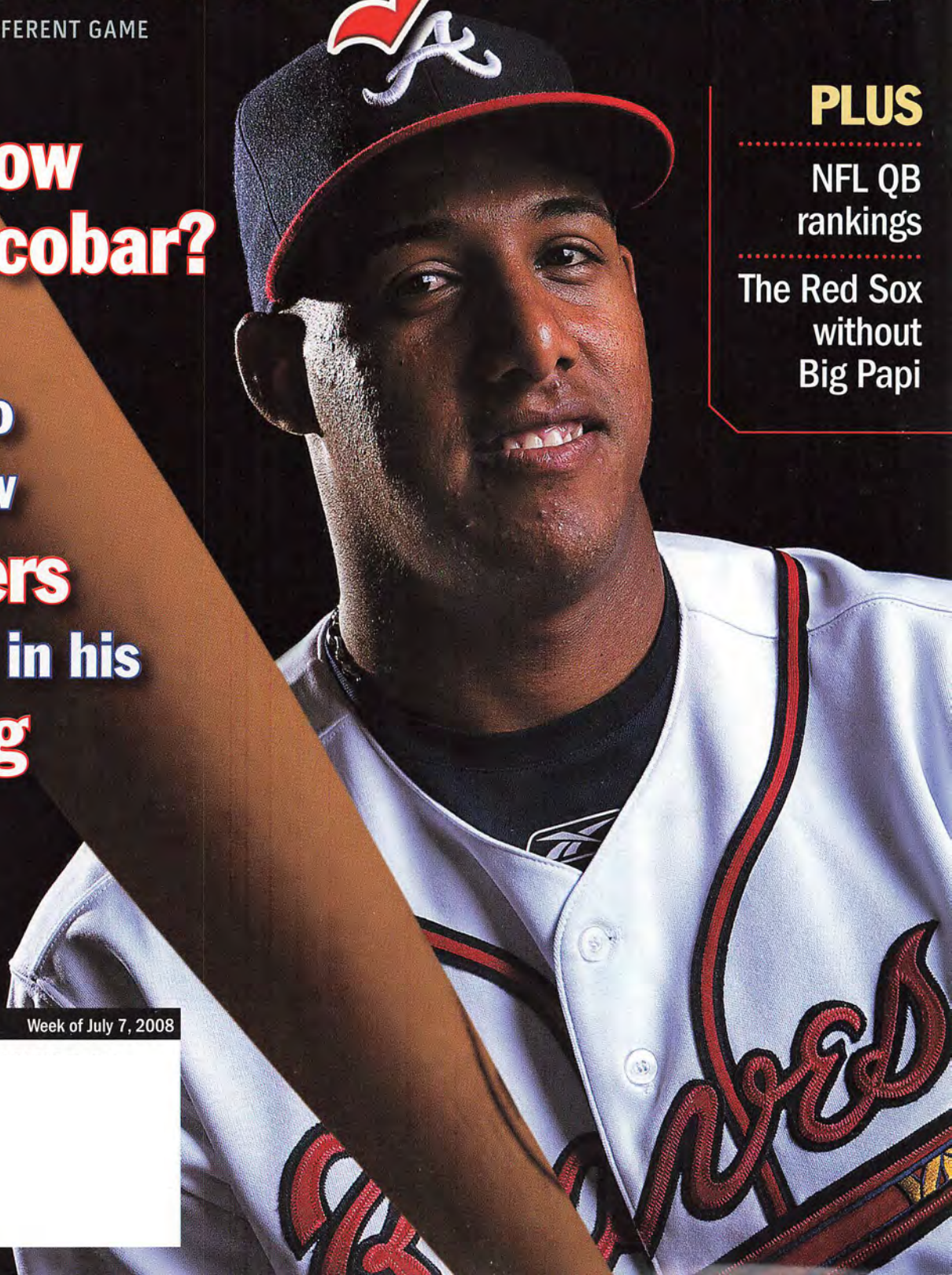
**Don't know
Yunel Escobar?
You will.**

**But you also
should know
five players
who shared in his
harrowing
escape
from Cuba.**

PLUS

NFL QB
rankings

The Red Sox
without
Big Papi



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Week of July 7, 2008



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THIS WEEK

> **NBA DRAFT**

12 Sitting pretty

For now, at least. The Bulls got their man, Derrick Rose, with the top pick in the draft, but their work is far from done. *By Sean Deveney.* Plus, the draft's winners and losers.

> **NFL**

20 In search of redemption

If Mike Martz is still a genius, he has no better proving ground than San Francisco, where Alex Smith and Mike Nolan need help to save their jobs. *By Clifton Brown*

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COVER STORY

26 Adrift no more, but still finding their way

On October 9, 2004, a boat carrying 36 Cubans reached Florida. Six of the men aboard aspired to play professional baseball. This is their story of danger, intrigue and hope. *By Matt Crossman and Bob Parajon*

KNOW IT ALL

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- 7 **On Deck** A win-win-win situation: Wimbledon, the Tour de France and Yankees-Red Sox. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5.**
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- 9 **Draftees take Manhattan** Before the hard work starts, soon-to-be NBA players have a little fun.
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Robin Lopez, draft winner? Not with that hat-hair combination.

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CHAMPIONS
Dell

Adding James to the roster would be a slam dunk for any team.

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TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1 THE MAIN EVENT 2010 vision

Boy, oh, boy, are folks in NBA front offices everywhere salivating. The free-agent market will do that to a general manager. Not this summer's free-agent market—duds abound there—and not even next year's. No, teams are lathered up for 2010, when Joe Johnson, Amare Stoudemire, Tracy McGrady, Michael Redd, Chris Bosh, Dirk Nowitzki and Dwyane Wade will be contract-free.

But those will all be consolation prizes (even Wade). That's because the top name on the list is the league's biggest—LeBron James. And get this: When the summer of free-agent love rolls around, James will be but 25 years old.

Every team has LeBron fever. That was evident on draft night last week, when the Nets dealt Richard Jefferson to create cap space in '10. Other teams drafted players who could help lure James. Some, though, have no cap room (the Celtics and Lakers). Some figure to have no chance (those in small markets like Indiana and Minnesota or out-of-country markets like Toronto and those coached by Larry Brown, like Charlotte). In the end, only a handful of teams will have a shot at LeBron. The likeliest to land James:



Nets. After trading Jefferson, they drafted a nice haul of Brook Lopez, Ryan Anderson and Chris Douglas-Roberts. They'll have money, they have James pal Jay-Z as one of their owners, and they're moving to Brooklyn. The Nets are in prime LeBron-landing position.



Knicks. New York will have to protect its salary cap room, but the presumption is that if James is going to leave Cleveland, he will do so only to save the Knicks (and bump up his endorsement dollars in the league's biggest market).



Cavaliers. James has said he doesn't want to leave Cleveland, and the Cavs, by league rules, will be able to pay him more than any other team. Cleveland also will have the cash to bring in another top-shelf free agent of James' choosing.



Bulls. Is there a better place for a fella who wears No. 23? The Bulls drafted James' friend Derrick Rose, his ideal point guard.



Heat. The phone call is not hard to imagine. Wade says, "I'll stay in Miami if you want to join me. We've got Michael Beasley. South Beach, too." James says, "Hmmm. What's Pat Riley's number?" Just like that, the Wade-James tandem is born.



San Antonio. If it's a championship James wants, helping Tim Duncan close out his career would not be a bad idea.

—Sean Deveney

JESSE D. GARRABANT / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE YANKEES

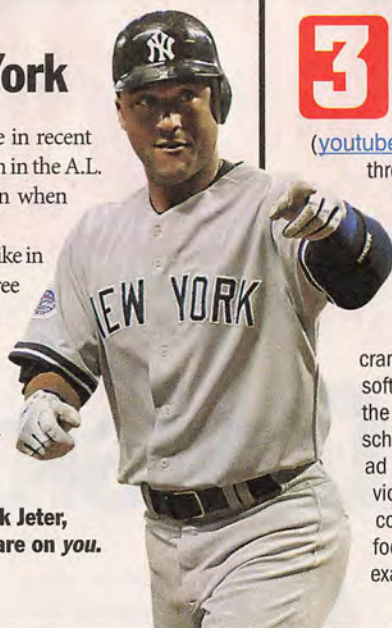
It's up to you, New York

We've been down this road a time or three in recent years—eyeballing the Yankees' modest position in the A.L. East standings and pontificating that this could be the season when their streak of consecutive playoff appearances goes kaputski.

But the Yanks always manage to get the job done, don't they? Like in 2007, when they lost their fourth in a row on June 27, stood at three games under .500, had an angry owner, were ripped eight ways from Sunday in the media and ... went on to win 94 games.

They appear to be better off this year—44-37 and on a nearly three-week-long roll, albeit squarely behind the Red Sox and Rays in third place. But by the middle of next week—after four home games (starting Thursday) against the Red Sox followed by two against the Rays—we'll all have much clearer points of view on where the Yankees are headed.

At least we *think* we will. —Steve Greenberg



No, Derek Jeter, all eyes are on you.

3

QUICK CLICKS

Crying foul

If you watched the "ball girl" video (youtube.com/watch?v=Hvmlp2QPfsE) as it whizzed through cyberspace and said, "I can't believe it," you were right. The video, originally intended for a Gatorade commercial, starts with a real at-bat by Class AAA Tacoma's Brent Johnson and ends with the Fresno Grizzlies' ball girl leaping up the left field wall to grab his foul ball. The play was fake—the girl was helped up by a crane and harness—but it *looked* real: One college softball coach even called the Grizzlies and asked for the girl's name because he wanted to offer her a scholarship. Gatorade abandoned the campaign the ad was a part of before it was released, but the video began making the rounds last week. Ad company Element 79 insists it did not leak the footage, though it could not have asked for a better example of viral marketing. —John Rawlings

4

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

14

Interleague wins for the Twins this season, the most in the majors. The A.L. Central had more interleague victories than any other division—even the bottom-feeding Royals piled up 13 wins.



5

SUPERHERO

Yes, it's possible to be good at more than one thing—witness Pacers forward Danny Granger, who had a Guitar Hero III jam session with a 10-year-old fan at the team's draft party last week. (Fun fact: Granger's little brother Scotty sings backup for former *American Idol* champion—and daughter of former NFL player Phillipppi Sparks—Jordin Sparks.)

6

IT BEARS REPEATING

'Uga VI was a damn good mascot and a damn good dog.'

—Georgia athletic director Damon Evans on Uga VI, who died last week of congestive heart failure. During Uga VI's nine-year reign as mascot, the university's football team went 87-27 and won two SEC titles. The bulldog will be buried in a marble vault at Sanford Stadium.

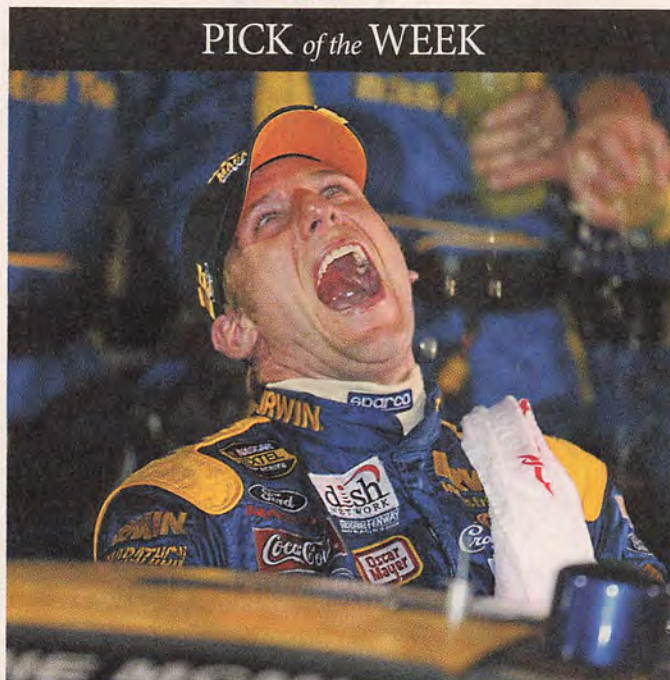


ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports

PICK of the WEEK



Open wider, Mr. McMurray—here comes some Coke Zero.

SAT 5

Isn't July supposed to be a boring time of the year for sports? Not on this day. The Tour de France starts, the Cubs play the Cardinals, and the Giants match up against the Dodgers. But if you can watch only one thing, make it the **Wimbledon women's final** (9 a.m., NBC).

■ But if you *can* watch two things, the **Coke Zero 400** (8 p.m., TNT) is always ripe for craziness. Last year, Jamie McMurray beat Kyle Busch by about the width of this magazine.

SUN 6 The Roger Federer Show, also known as the **Wimbledon men's final** (9 a.m., NBC), gives you a little history in the making—Federer has won five straight titles there—as he chases “best ever” status.

■ What better way to cap off your Fourth of July weekend than with some good old-fashioned A.L. East fireworks? The **Yankees visit the Red Sox** (8 p.m., ESPN).

MON 7 Stage 3 of the **Tour de France** (8:30 a.m., Versus) is one of the longest of the whole event at 208 kilometers, so you can't reasonably be expected to watch the whole thing. But watching cycling is kind of like actually cycling, so the more you get the better.

WED 9 If your team is going to make a run at the Celtics or Lakers, this is the day that run starts—it's the first day **NBA free agents can officially be signed**.

—Matt Crossman

BOB HILLE'S
STARTING

5

1 All-Star balloting. I'm pleasantly surprised by some of the voting so far because, frankly, a few of the fans I know can't tell their Milton Bradley from a hole in the ground.

2 Michael Strahan. FOX has added him to its NFL pregame show this fall, calling him the only person in the last 15 years worth “extending the desk for.” High praise, but clearly that doesn't take into account the addition Jimmy Johnson built to hold his styling gel.

3 Maple bats. Let's be honest: There's only one surefire way to make them safe, and that's to put them in the Nationals' hands.

4 NHL free agency. Teams are looking for the slick and heady, even at the expense of style. Or, wait ... am I thinking of Barry Melrose's hair?

5 The Fourth of July. I don't know what makes me feel more unabashedly American, this holiday or not being able to possibly care less about Wimbledon.

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■ Many thanks for an awesome and uplifting story about David Tyree (SN, June 23). There are many of these types of stories, but most magazines won't print them. I have always been a big fan of SPORTING NEWS because you focus on the positive. —Norm Gough via e-mail

■ David Tyree is a man who could have afforded to do most everything wrong but chose otherwise. If it is faith in God that led to that choice, then his faith is a good thing, regardless of whether the rest of us share that faith. —Mastodon via SportingNews.com

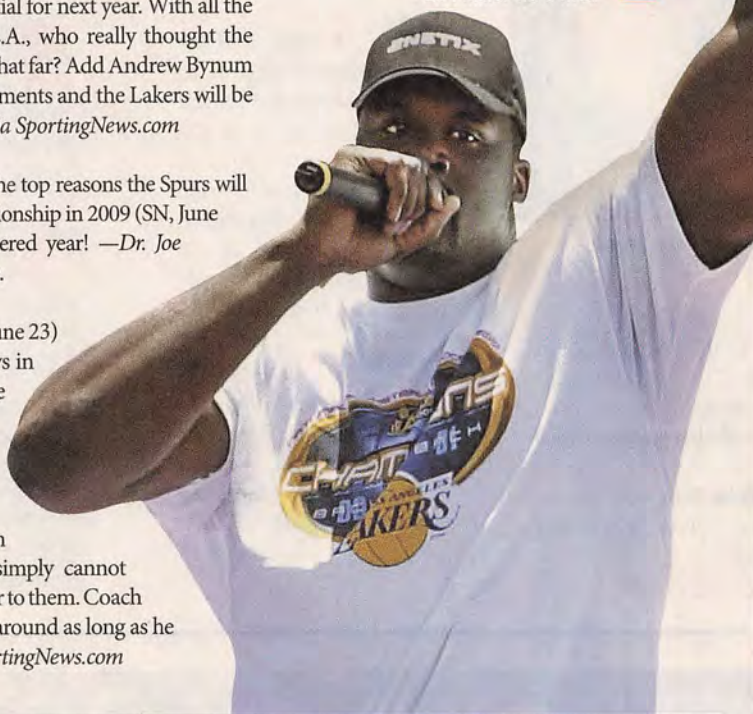
■ Considering how successful they were this season (despite The Finals loss), the Lakers (SN, June 23) have a lot of potential for next year. With all the preseason drama in L.A., who really thought the Lakers would make it that far? Add Andrew Bynum and make some adjustments and the Lakers will be fine. —joemama805 via SportingNews.com

■ You missed one of the top reasons the Spurs will contend for the championship in 2009 (SN, June 23): It's an odd-numbered year! —Dr. Joe DeMaio, Kennesaw, Ga.

■ Jim Calhoun (SN, June 23) is one of the good guys in coaching. Guys like Calhoun are great precisely because they love the game more than almost anything. Like Jordan and Ali, these lifers simply cannot walk away. More power to them. Coach Calhoun should stick around as long as he wants. —5288 via SportingNews.com

I heard Shaq's rap song. What he should say is, 'You know how I be/I can't do it without Dwyane or Kobe.'

—L.P. Miller via e-mail



RE: HARD TO WATCH

Posted by feathersforever

I know I should not dislike a player because of injuries, but Nick Johnson's status as a habitually injured player is disconcerting. The fact that he is capable of hitting .290 or so with 20-plus home runs keeps me from saying I *truly* dislike having him on the Nationals, but the fact that he is taking up more than 10 percent of the team's payroll without playing many games is difficult to take. I would love to see a team that thinks it can get more out of Johnson take him away from Washington.

RE: DON'T COUNT YOUR TITLES ...

Posted by The Naptown Ref

Let's finish the season before we crown Kyle Busch. I remember baseball teams finishing with over 100 wins and failing to win the World Series. There have been NBA teams with more than 55 wins who failed to bring home a ring. Finally, must I remind everyone that the famous Pats went 16-0 during the regular season, only to look clueless after the Super Bowl?

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

'What's the motivation for USA basketball? If they win the gold medal like they are supposed to, no one will care. If they lose again, they become a joke. The fact that they got anyone decent to play on this team is a miracle.'

—Dennis in Phoenix on The Postgame with Peter Brown

POLLING PLACE

I sure wish I could declare my independence from _____.

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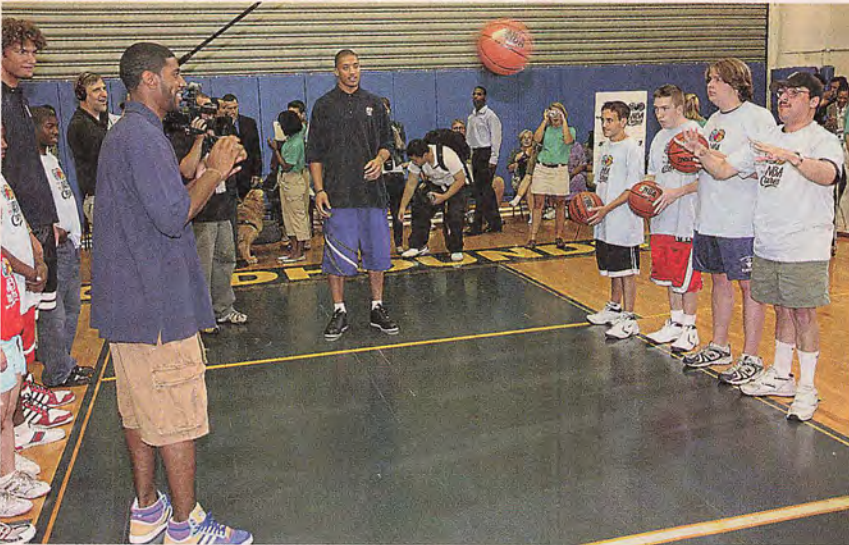
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

Draftees take Manhattan

The hard work is about to start for these soon-to-be NBA players ... but first, a little fun



Clockwise from top: O.J. Mayo (left) teaches a passing drill at a Special Olympics clinic; Anthony Randolph signs his autograph on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange; twins Brook (left) and Robin Lopez attend a movie premiere in Harlem; Jerryd Bayless (left) and Kevin Love trade stories while on the way to an NBA Cares event.

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Survival of the (non) fittest

Athletes earn scholarships and sometimes outlandish salaries for good reason—because they do things you cannot do. SPORTING NEWS blogger Spencer Hall underwent a two-day torture session at *DI Sports Training*, an athlete performance facility in Franklin, Tenn., to see how the average Joe stacks up. Lessons learned from Day 2, an MMA-style workout:

1 If you start off running backward, you are in trouble. Will, my trainer, tells me to warm up by running backward around the field twice. This should be a clarion sign of impending trouble, as running backward for longer than four or five steps feels as natural as drinking through your nose.

Will has this smile on his face. It's an amusing, almost impish look: a man in his element preparing to do precisely what he does best. This equation changes somewhat when you are the target and that thing he does best is "working people up to and past their limits of physical endurance."

2 Very simple things can kill you in combinations. Take a few benign household cleaners and mix them up in your sink and you'll off yourself in your kitchen. The same thing applies to simple exercises like push-ups, sit-ups and jumping jacks: Alone, they're fine. Repeated for 5 minutes straight in 20-second stages, they become pure, toxic evil.

3 Gravity + weight + poorly conditioned writer = reversal of fortune.

On the way down a set of stairs, after grabbing a 20-pound medicine ball, I decide, quite involuntarily, that hunching over the garbage can seems like a worthwhile idea. Nine minutes into the workout, I vomit my lunch into the can.

4 If kettlebells are the easy part, you are in trouble. A kettlebell is an old Russian weight—imagine a cannonball with a flat bottom and a handle. Oddly, it's not bad: Kettlebell swings involve taking the prehistoric weight with both hands, squatting and then launching it forward. The sensation is pleasant, especially with my entire body and soul flooded with endorphins from puking. The worst has already happened. What can be worse than the stairs?

Those medicine balls have to come down now.

Oh, that. That's what could be worse. I head up the stairs, fully brain-dead and working from only the most primitive centers of my mind.

5 Flipping tires is best left to men named Magnus. Flipping a 335-pound tire once is not impossible. Doing it 20 times and hopping through the tire after every flip is a little different.

6 Sledgehammers can hurt you. Will has me



'I wonder if I can take a nap inside this thing ...'

pound on a tire with a sledgehammer. Maybe we did one set. Maybe we did seven. It would be really nice to have had notes about this, but you can't take notes when you're swinging a sledgehammer and your brain has been switched to the off position for the past 45 minutes. Even if I could have dictated notes, it would have been the words "HELP, OH LORD, HELP!" over and over again.

7 Stupidity is willingly stepping into the same bear trap twice. Lying on the ground, I ask Will what I should do to work out at home, when I'm not at DI's torture camp. Lifting? Running?

"Have you considered walking? Walking would be really good for you."

It would be. But, in truly stupid fashion, I want to do this again. The reasoning is unfathomable, but I suspect that after two days of failing, failing and then failing again to do anything right in a workout, I finally found something I'm good at: not dying.

—Spencer Hall

For more on Spencer Hall's brush with death, visit thesportingblog.com.

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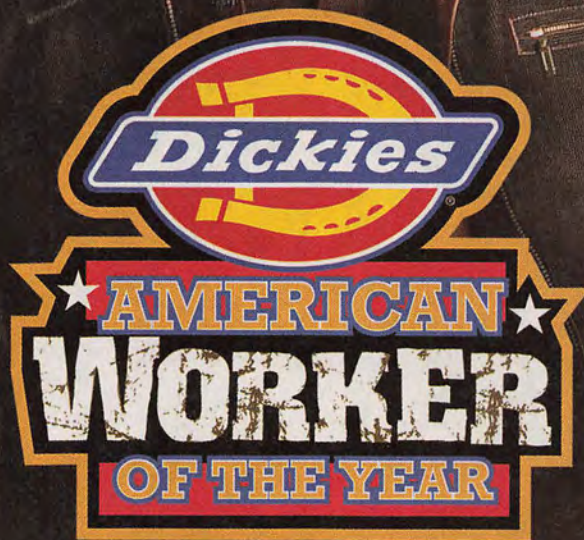
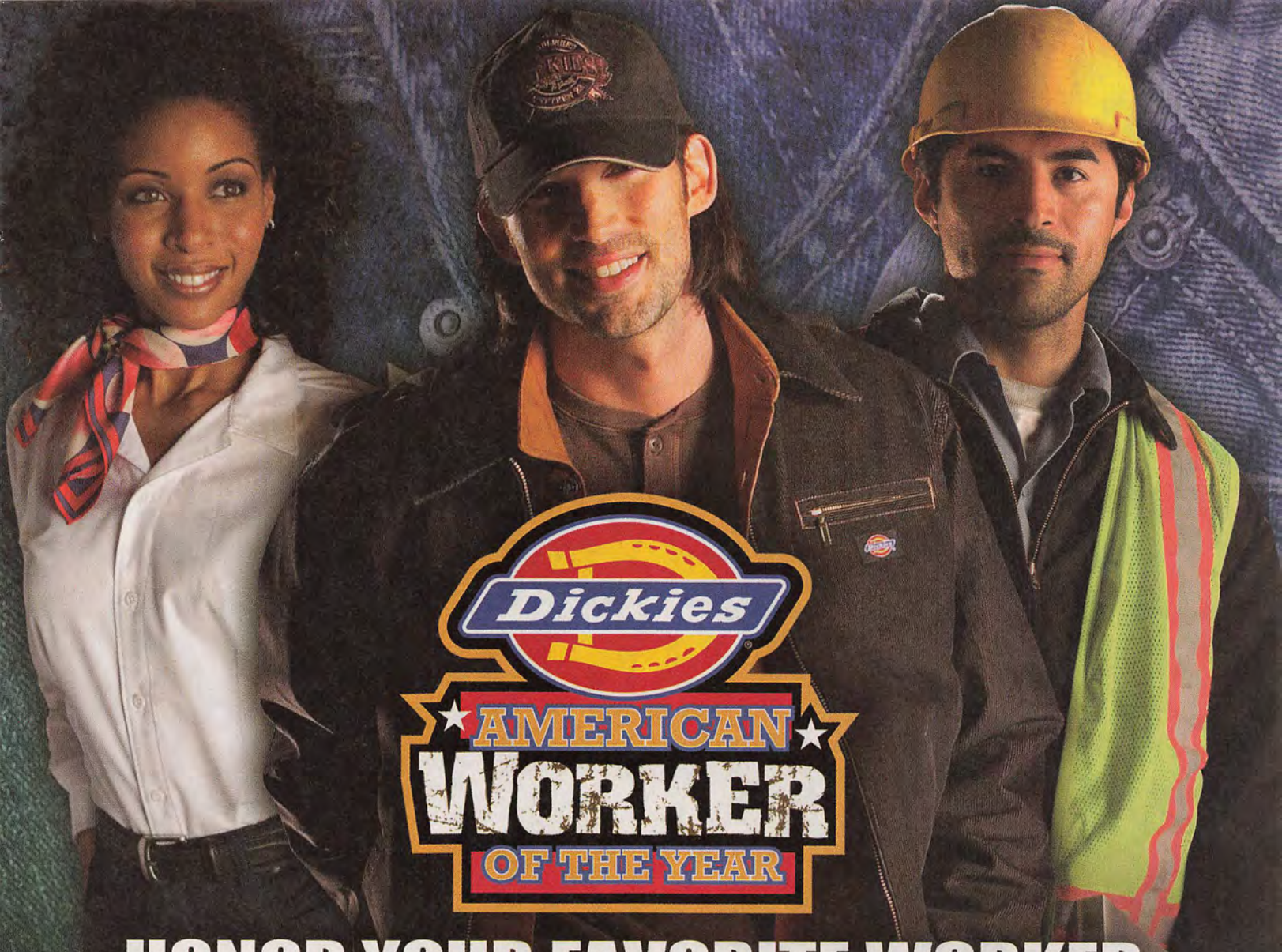
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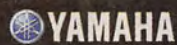
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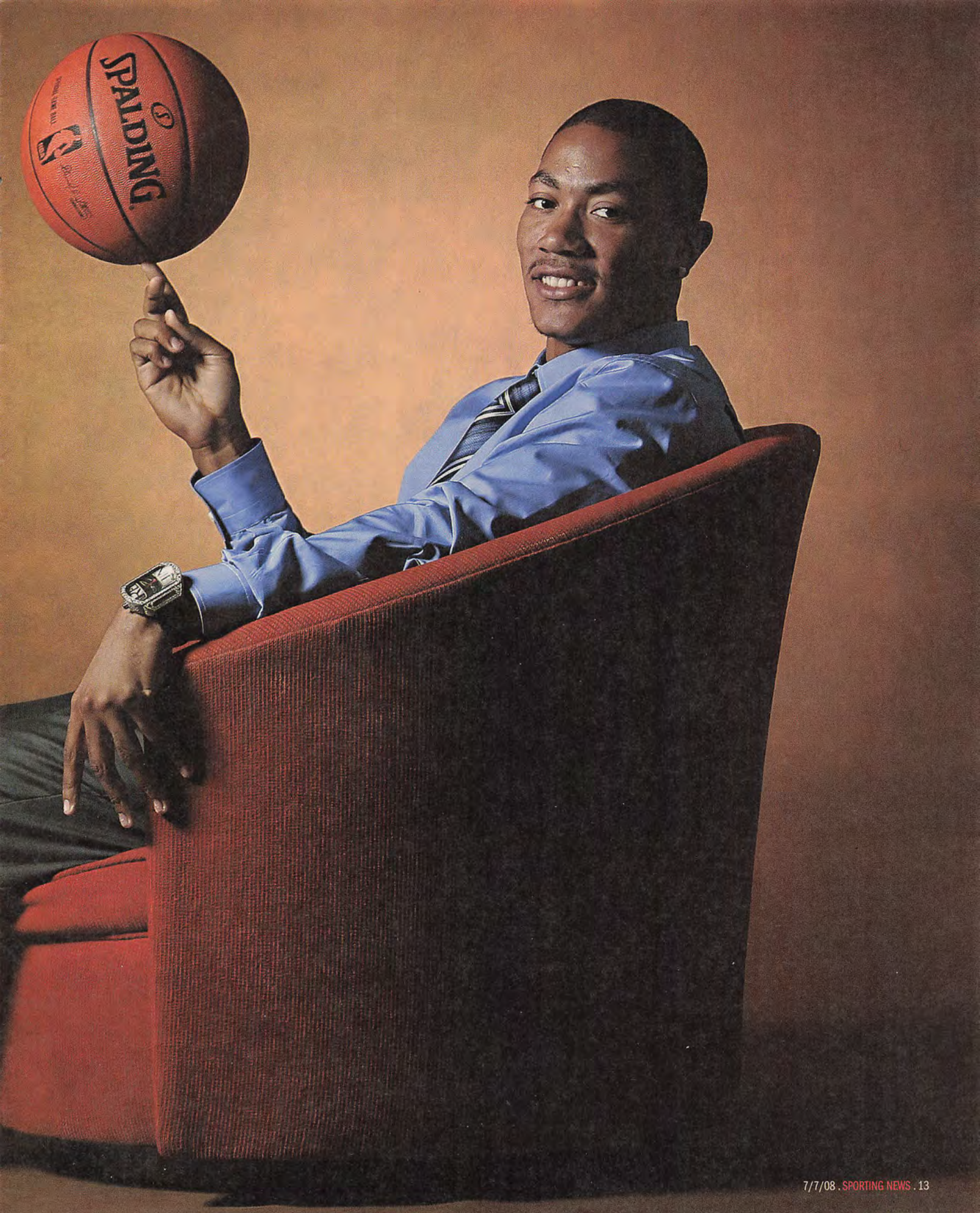
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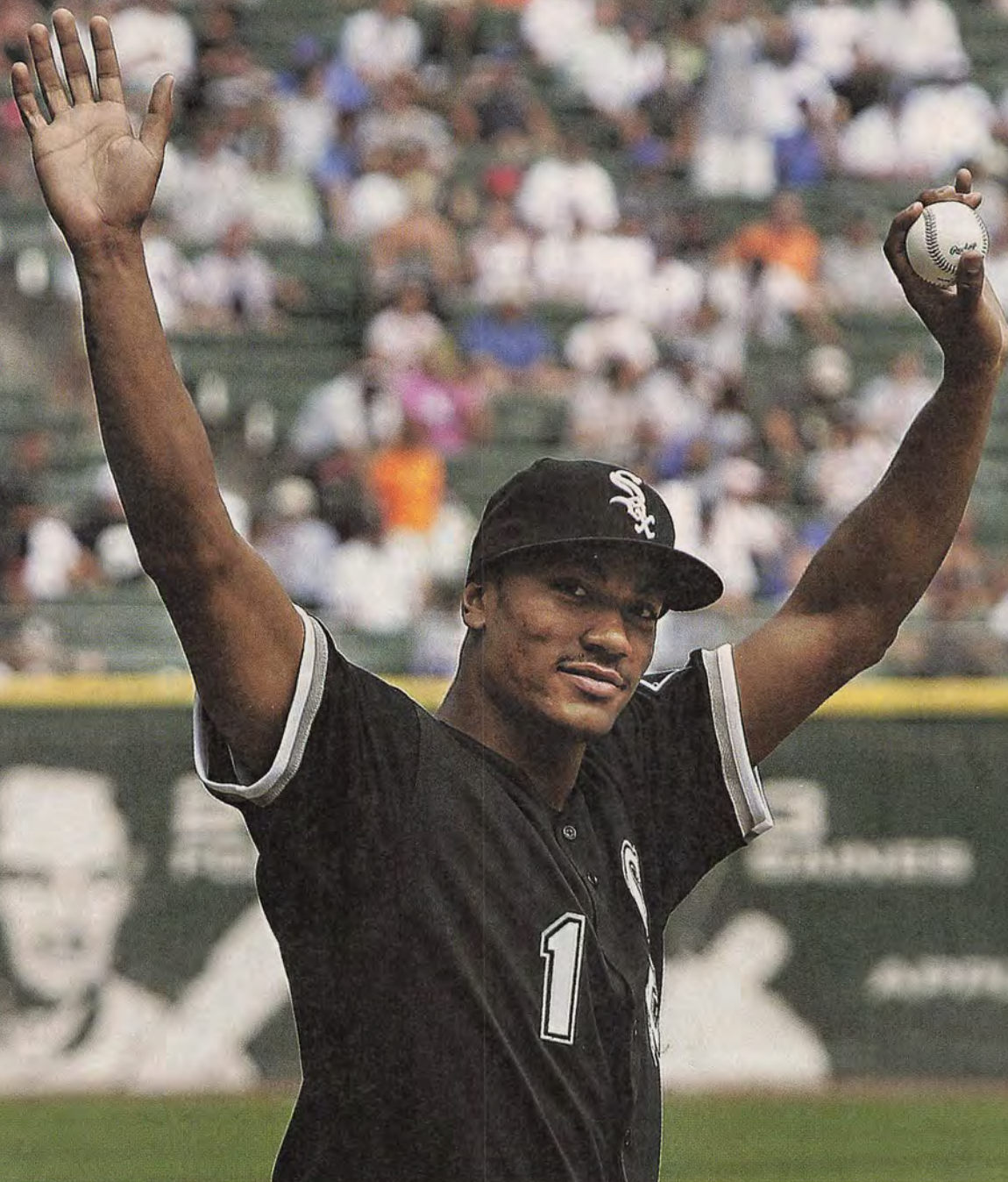


Sitting pretty

For now, that is. But even after getting their man, **Derrick Rose**, the Bulls' work is far from done.

By Sean Deveney





Right city, wrong uniform: Rose threw out the first pitch at a White Sox game the day after being drafted by his hometown Bulls.

In the weeks before this year's NBA draft, rare was the Chicago fan who had not formulated an opinion on how the Bulls should cash in their incredible luck in the league's lottery, where they had a 1.7 percent chance of winning the first pick—and did so. There were two choices, the only two guys the Bulls worked out: Kansas State forward Michael Beasley and Memphis point guard Derrick Rose, who grew up in Chicago and led Simeon High to back-to-back state championships. El train riders, mail carriers, cab drivers—everyone had their two cents. If you'd been a Chicagoan at some point, no matter where you now call home, you were going to be asked. And as the draft grew closer, the answers increasingly came back: "Rose, Rose, Rose."

Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski, a South Side native: "Michael is a great talent, but when you get the chance to take a point guard who is as tough and has the leadership that Derrick has, you have to take him."

Heat guard Dwyane Wade—who went to Richards High on the South Side—wouldn't have minded seeing Rose drafted by his team, which picked second: "He is going to be a good one. He is going to have a great NBA career."

Even presidential candidate Barack Obama, another South Sider, chimed in with his endorsement, telling reporters: "Beasley probably gives them more immediate help. But I think Rose is the better prospect long term. That guy's like Jason Kidd with a jump shot."

Thus it was hardly a surprise that the Bulls' brain trust—which kept the charade of decision making going until just hours before the draft—went with Rose. Beasley's production in his one year of college—26.2 points and 12.4 rebounds per game—was astounding, but Rose is a true ball-distributing point guard who possesses the intangibles the Bulls were missing. After making the pick, general manager John Paxson said, "In this league, point guards are really hard to find, and he has a strength about him at that

position that most guards don't have in this league. ... He will make other players better and give us some leadership abilities as he goes on that we really need."

Which is a thought that should provide a sobering reality check to counter the Bulls' Rose-induced euphoria. Chicago seriously lacked leadership last year, as its season deteriorated into a sideshow of infighting, contract jealousy, fired coaches and Joa-

They wound up hiring Vinny Del Negro, a personable guy with no shortage of enthusiasm but with a large shortage of experience (he has never coached in the NBA). They drafted Rose, who is a little more than a year removed from his senior prom. The Bulls, desperate for guidance and maturity, have handed over the two most important on-floor leadership roles to a first-timer and a teenager. "I think I can come in and make an impact right away," Rose

has a reputation as one of the most circumspect G.M.s in the NBA, which can sometimes be a negative (like when the Bulls could have pulled the trigger on a deal for big man Pau Gasol, who helped lead the Lakers to this year's Finals).

Paxson is in a bit of a jam. He knows he needs to make a trade for the sake of team chemistry and roster sanity. But if he makes a trade, he is definitively handing the keys over to Rose. He can't be sure that Rose is ready for that burden. "This isn't going to be Derrick coming in the first day and everything being great," Paxson says. "It's going to take time. We have guys who can play with him who will allow him to grow. We feel for the next 10 to 12 years, we have a position covered that is really important."

That's an understatement. In fact, both of the guard spots are covered—the Bulls have five potential starters at the two positions. Rose isn't buying Paxson's caution. "There's going to be moves made," he says. "I am not sure who is going to be there. ... But I am happy. I think we can go in and compete right away."

Maybe. But with a roster that still needs a good sledgehammering, the Bulls have a long way to go this summer. Drafting Rose was just the beginning. What happens next will have an even bigger impact on the team's immediate future. The Rose love-fest in Chicago could be short-lived. **SN**

The Bulls, desperate for guidance and maturity, have handed over the two most important on-floor leadership roles to a first-time coach and a teenager.

kim Noah-bashing. Last summer, the Bulls were a young, up-and-coming bunch that had just won 49 games, swept the defending champ Heat in the first round of the playoffs and put up a tougher-than-expected fight against the Pistons. Things fell apart so drastically in the 2007-08 season, though, that when the Bulls attempted to hire a coach this spring, they were rebuffed by new Knicks coach Mike D'Antoni (who wanted too much money) and veteran coach Doug Collins (who was never really wanted by some factions of management, anyway).

Let's not lose sight of where the Bulls are now.

says. "I plan on starting and being a leader right away."

Not so fast, kid. Paxson isn't ready to put that kind of pressure on Rose. Despite the glut of guards on the Bulls' roster—a situation that cries out for a trade—a shuffling of players is no certainty. Paxson has Larry Hughes and Kirk Hinrich, last year's starters, along with sixth man Ben Gordon and defensive ace Thabo Sefolosha. Now, he also has Rose. There isn't playing time for all of those guys, and a crowd like that would only set up the Bulls for another season of locker room strife. But Paxson

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THE DECAL IS BACK

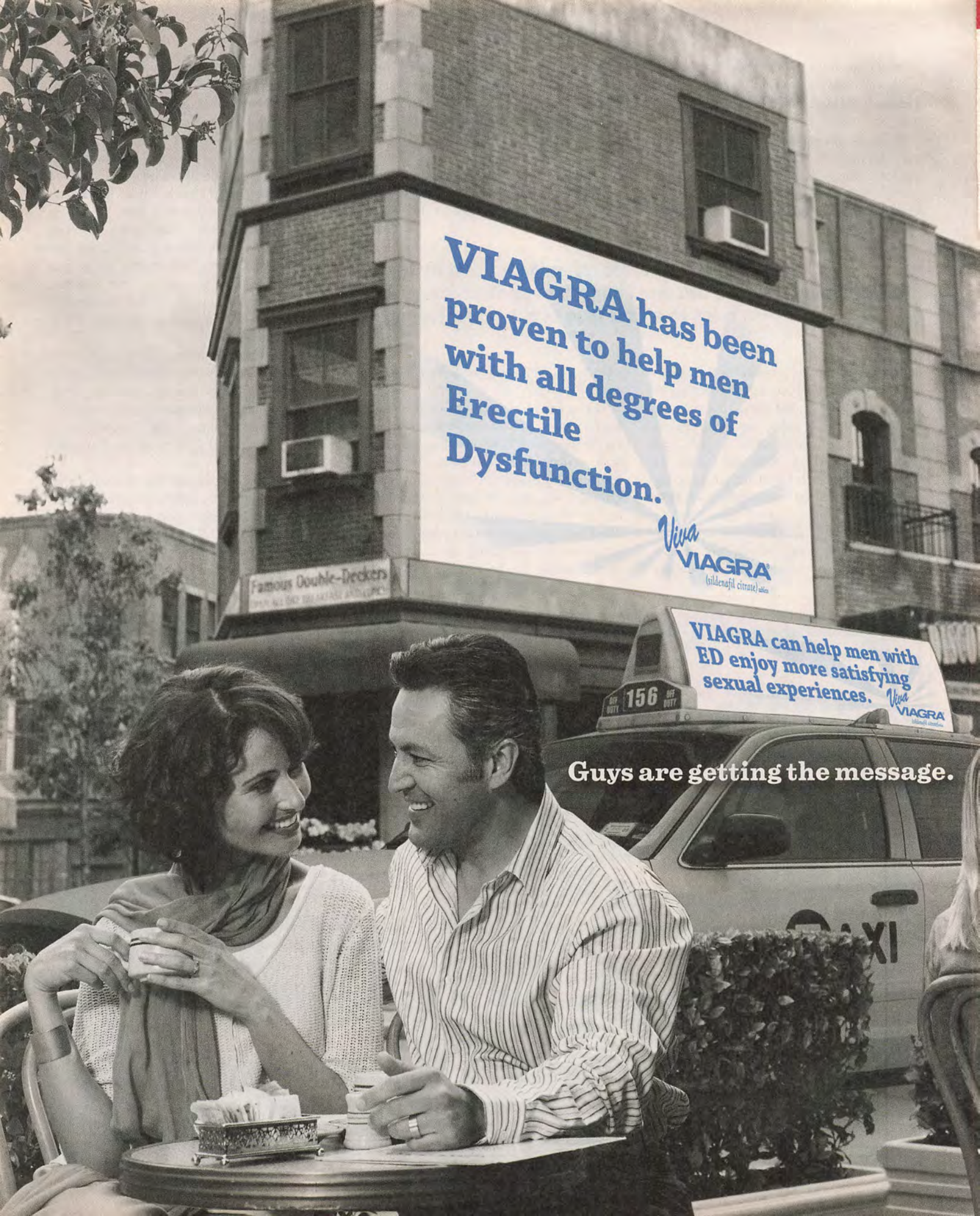


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BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

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- Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
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- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems, such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

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POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

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The most common side effects are:

- Headache
- Feeling flushed
- Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
- Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
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- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

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Do:

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited. VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
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WINNERS AND SINNERS

Got it right



Bulls. Derrick Rose is a player they can build around and one who could become a star. Turkish center Omer Asik, whose rights were acquired from the Trail Blazers, could be a steal if he ever leaves Europe.



Bucks. It was a big night for Milwaukee. The best move was getting Richard Jefferson for slug Bobby Simmons and not-ready-for-prime-NBA-time power forward Yi Jianlian. No. 8 pick Joe Alexander is Scott Skiles' kind of player, a guy who will hustle and attack the basket. The team's second-round choice, UCLA's Luc Richard Mbah a Moute is, in the best description ever from a scout, "Ron Artest without the crazy."



Trail Blazers. Jerryd Bayless could team nicely with Brandon Roy in the backcourt. Undervalued forward Ike Diogu, acquired with Bayless in a trade with the Pacers, could be a big surprise. French forward Nicolas Batum is a good risk. He is talented but sank to No. 25 on questionable reports of heart irregularities.



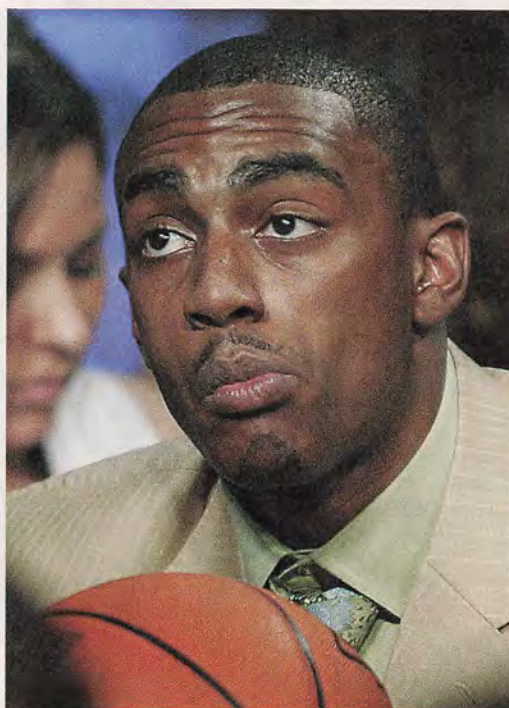
Raptors. They gave up their first-round pick and point guard T.J. Ford to take a chance on Jermaine O'Neal, who made the All-Star team as recently as 2007. If O'Neal, 29, can get his game back, the Raptors will be a factor in the East.



Bobcats. The selection of D.J. Augustin made it clear new coach Larry Brown doesn't like incumbent point guard Raymond Felton. At least Augustin can get the ball to teammates and run a pick-and-roll. Kyle Weaver is an unheralded second-round guard who could be a surprise.



Rockets. With a series of moves, they ended up with athletic Syracuse forward Donte Greene and physical Memphis forward Joey Dorsey, which wasn't bad for picking late in the first round.



Arthur waited ... and waited ... and waited to find out his final destination on draft night.



Jefferson wasn't the only good thing the Bucks came away with on draft night.

No help in sight



Grizzlies. You're never sure what the Grizzlies, who made a big trade with Minnesota for the rights to O.J. Mayo and a bunch of junk, are trying to do. Poor Darrell Arthur. Even the New York fans in attendance felt sorry for the Kansas forward as he fell to the end of the first round, was dealt three times and landed in NBA purgatory.



Knicks. It didn't take fans at the draft long to start booing. Welcome to New York, Donnie Walsh and Mike D'Antoni. The question is, does LeBron James want to play with forward Danilo Gallinari in 2010?



Pacers. The Jermaine O'Neal trade was a salary dump. Making the deal with Portland for Jarrett Jack suggests the Pacers are unsure about T.J. Ford's health. Now, including Jamaal Tinsley, they have three point guards. Adding guard Brandon Rush (in the deal that netted Jack) and slow center Roy Hibbert (in the O'Neal deal) does little to cure their sad lack of athleticism.



Kings. It's not like the 12th overall pick is going to net an instant Hall of Famer, but going for Jason Thompson from Rider was the biggest surprise of the first round.



Cavaliers. Drafting power forward J.J. Hickson likely means they'll part ways with veteran Anderson Varejao, though it hardly means any help for LeBron James.



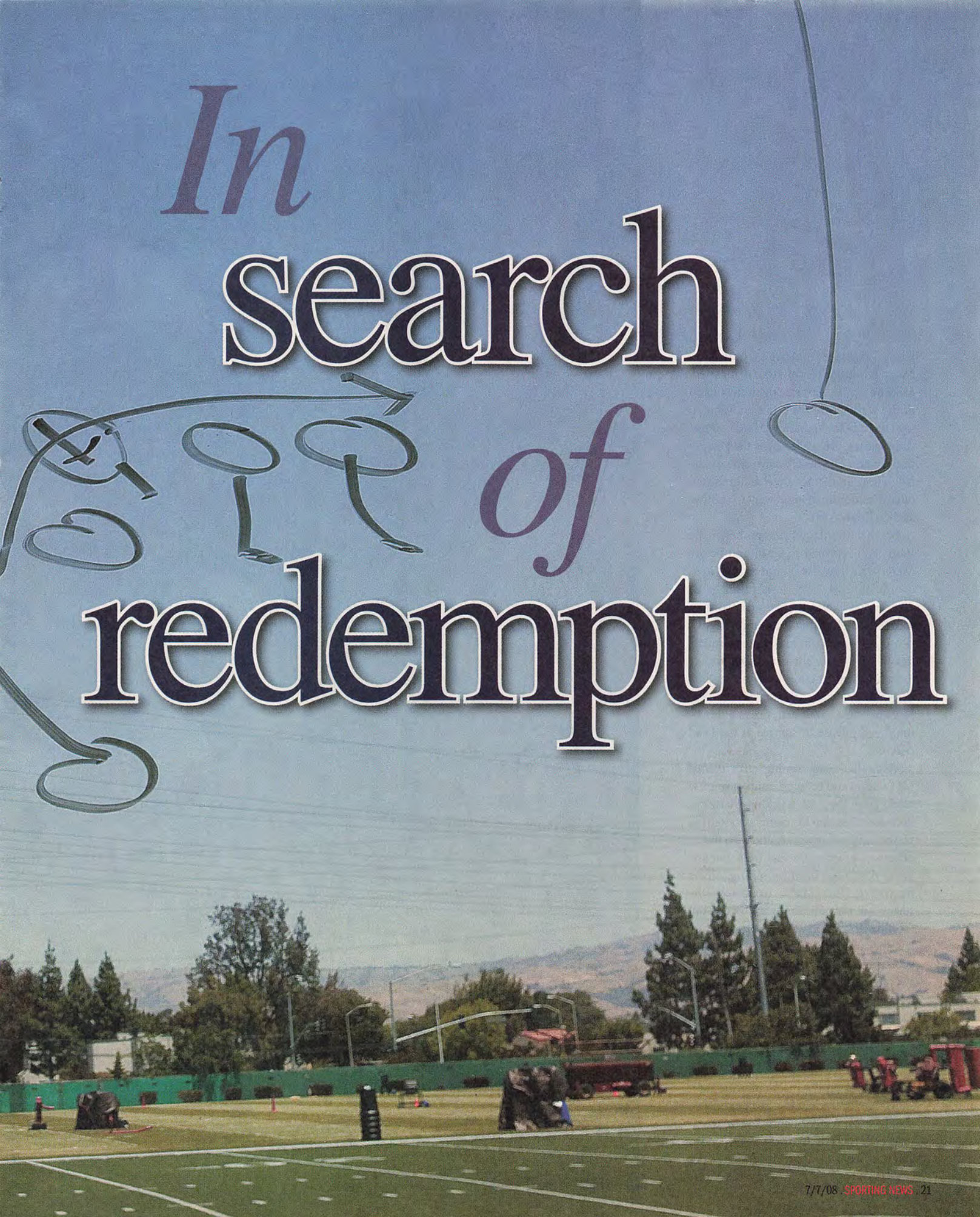
SuperSonics. Russell Westbrook is a nice combo guard, but the Sonics shocked everyone by picking him so high at No. 4. Poor Kevin Durant. If only he had gone to an NBA team. —Sam Smith



NFL

If Mike Martz is still a genius, he has no better proving ground than San Francisco, where Alex Smith and Mike Nolan need help to save their jobs
By Clifton Brown

Photos by Jay Drowns / SN



In search *of* redemption

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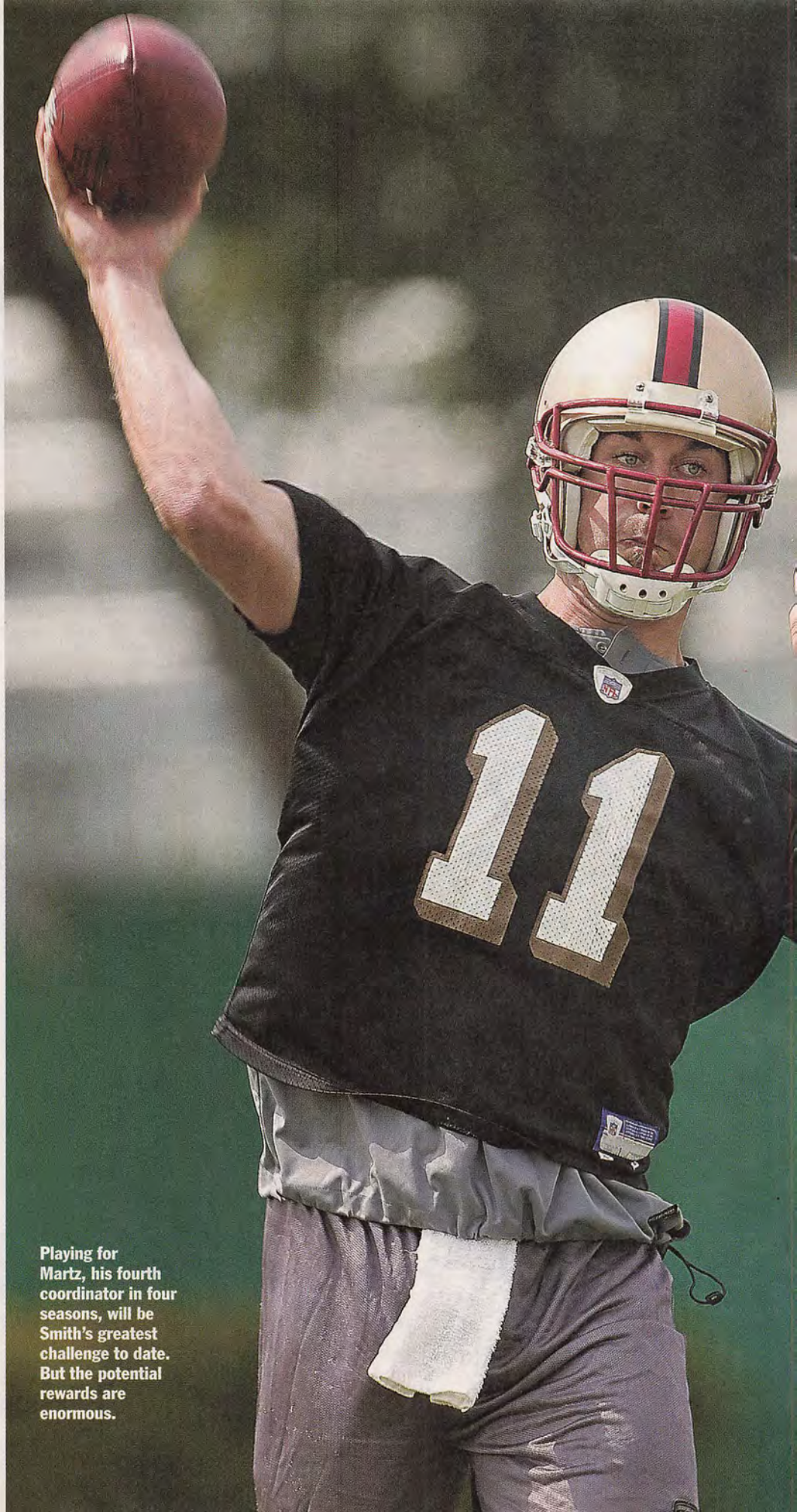
lex Smith is one bad season from being a bust. Mike Nolan is one bad season from being fired. Mike Martz? He isn't exactly sitting on top of the world these days, but he wants to save them both. You know Martz—innovator, daring play-caller, once the greatest thing going on the offensive side of the ball. He won a Super Bowl as the Rams' offensive coordinator and went to another as their head coach.

But that was many years ago, before the Rams had returned to earth and before Martz's failed two-year stint as the Lions' coordinator. Now Martz is running the 49ers' offense, and the fates of two men seemingly rest in his hands. Smith needs a coordinator who can make him the quarterback the 49ers envisioned when they took him with the top pick of the 2005 draft. And Nolan, who arrived in San Francisco that same year, needs a much-improved offense to survive as the head coach.

With the 49ers coming off a dismal 5-11 season and training camp only a few weeks away, the clock is ticking. Martz has been force-feeding his complex system to players unfamiliar with it, and each day of offseason preparation has been intense. Some days have been promising, others frustrating. But Martz recognizes the stakes, not only for Smith and Nolan but for himself, too. He wants to prove he still has the touch, that he deserves another shot as a head coach.

One former head coach is convinced Martz still has his fastball. "Mike Martz has already proven he knows how to coach in the National Football League," says Dick Vermeil, his boss in St. Louis. "We had great players with the Rams, but Mike was great at moving the pieces into the right spots. He loves to attack. His confidence changes your whole offensive approach."

Which is precisely what the 49ers need and precisely what Martz believes he'll do.



Playing for Martz, his fourth coordinator in four seasons, will be Smith's greatest challenge to date. But the potential rewards are enormous.

THE SYSTEM

For better or worse, the 49ers will be different—and more daring. Adding his own twists to a system created by former Chargers coach Don Coryell, Martz loves to stretch the field vertically, with receivers running downfield routes that require precise timing with the quarterback. It's a risky attack but one designed to make big plays if the quarterback makes proper reads and accurate throws and the receivers are where they're supposed to be.

Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner went from journeyman to Pro Bowl quarterback in Martz's scheme. He loves it. But he was challenged mentally like never before.

"It's the most demanding system I've ever played in, and it's not even close," says Warner. "Under Mike, you'd go into a game with 125 to 150 plays in the game plan, with two or three variations off each play. Compare that to other teams I've played on, where you'd take like 75 plays into the game, without nearly as many variations.

"To succeed in Mike's system as a quarterback, you've got to throw accurately downfield. You've got to stand in the pocket and take a hit because some of those patterns take time to develop. And you've got to have a complete understanding of the offense because stuff is there for you to take advantage of, but you've got to know when and where to go with the football."

Martz, 57, cannot escape this truth: His offense hummed when he had Ferrari parts like Warner, running back Marshall Faulk and wide receivers Torrey Holt and Isaac Bruce. But with Ford parts in Detroit, Martz's offense pulled out of the fast lane.

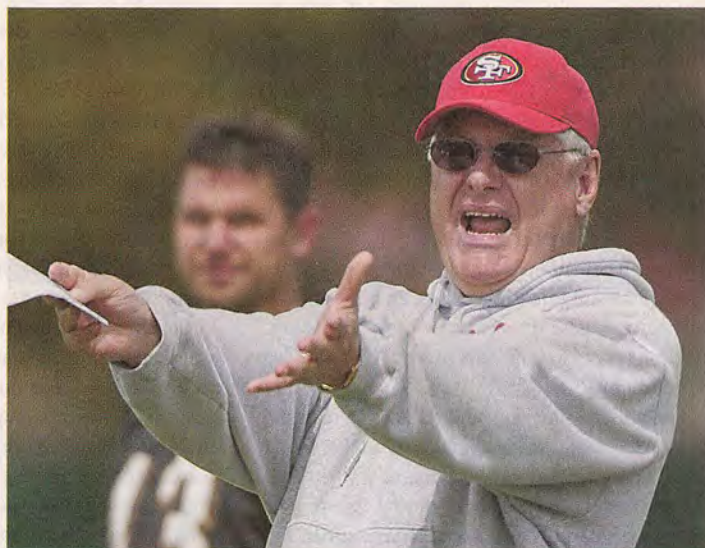
That makes Martz's arrival in San Francisco more fascinating, a gauge to measure whether he is overrated or underappreciated. If Martz revives this offense, you'll start hearing the word *genius* attached to his name again. The 49ers were a triple crown dud last season, the league's worst in total offense, passing offense and points scored. They needed more than a nip and tuck. They needed a face-lift. So Nolan called Martz. "There's no one more creative in terms of using personnel," says Nolan.

The 49ers' personnel, however, still has much to learn.

THE CLASSROOM

Holding playbooks and wearing serious expressions, the 49ers' quarterbacks walk into their meeting room. Welcome to summer school, Mike Martz, headmaster.

On this June morning near the end of 49ers OTAs, Martz is adding wrinkles to an ever-growing playbook. Learning the plays is the most tedious part of the job for the quarterbacks but one of the most important. You can't run the



offense if you don't know it. And getting to the end of Martz's immense playbook is no easy task. "I'm not sure it ever ends," Smith says.

Martz is sitting at a large table in the center of the room. Quarterbacks coach Ted Tollner sits to Martz's right, with quarterbacks Smith, Shaun Hill, J.T. O'Sullivan and Drew Olson filling other chairs. "We're installing these plays today," says Martz, holding up a white sheet of paper broken into eight grids, each grid containing a diagramed play.

Martz wastes no time diving into the nuances of play No. 1. He communicates in Martzspeak, which sounds like a foreign language unless you

Martz is quick to cite a precedent for what the 49ers hope to do this season—a turnaround like the one he orchestrated in St. Louis in 1999.

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have mastered the 49ers' playbook. The football terminology rolls off his tongue rapidly, like an auctioneer after two cups of coffee.

"If you want to take a five-step drop on this, Alex, it's fine," says Martz. "If Z is there, he's viable for you in terms of pressure. If you get the flat and they swoop it and the color shows inside the 5, make a quick decision."

Did you get all that? For the 49ers, it's imperative that Smith get it. One of the first things Martz did when he took this job was to explain his terminology. Anyone who doesn't know it by now is lost. "We can't afford to wait," says Martz. "We just move on without you."

Later, Tollner interrupts Martz to ask a question about a red zone passing play. It's crucial that Martz and Tollner be on the same page because when Tollner teaches the quarterbacks during one-on-one sessions, he doesn't want to send mixed signals.

"If there's a corner blitz, does the slant stay on?" Tollner asks.

"The slant stays on," says Martz. "Corner blitz, safety blitz, doesn't matter. You hit the slant."

Martz moves to the next play.

"We want them to cover 2 this sucker so you can get this thing into the corner," he says. "This is really a good red zone play for 2 and A because the corner really gets suckered. We've never run this before. If you get the Red 2 in this thing, just look right at that corner. If the corner hesitates at all,

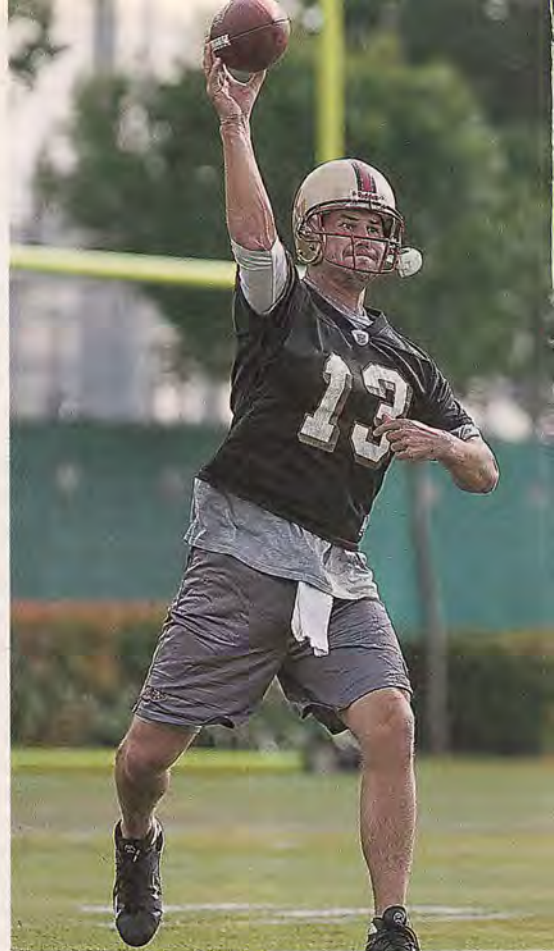
jump-start to his career that Martz's offense gave Warner's. If nothing else, Smith knows it will give him more options without having to ad-lib.

"I'm asked to do a lot of different things, and I have to have a lot of different tools," says Smith. "For me, watching film early on and not having the knowledge of the offense, it looks like the gunslinger back there. But it's very fundamental. It's very much the opposite of 'go out and make it happen.' This is very thought-out. Everything is done for a reason. Everything is coached extremely hard."

One of Martz's first objectives in training camp will be to identify the starter—and the 49ers want it to be the 6-4, 217-pound Smith. But they can't ignore Hill, who had played in only one game in his first five years (with the Vikings and 49ers) before battling his way into the mix by performing well in Smith's absence last season (101.3 passer rating in three games). And O'Sullivan, who was in Detroit with Martz last year, is more familiar with the offense than the competition.

If the starter were named, Martz would be installing the offense even faster. Instead, the quarterback battle will spill into training camp. "You'd like to get that settled as soon as you can, so that you can start developing that chemistry," says Martz, who is Smith's fourth offensive coordinator in four seasons.

That merry-go-round of coordinators has often been cited as a reason for Smith's struggles, but



The 49ers needed more than a nip and tuck. They need

you'll get the seven."

All the quarterbacks look at Martz and nod in agreement. On paper, it all makes sense. But Martz must wait until training camp to get a better feel for how often plays will be executed the way they are designed.

"Hopefully, guys are getting to know their playbooks well," says Martz. "When one or two guys are lost, any play you call looks terrible."

THE QUARTERBACK BATTLE

Smith, Hill and O'Sullivan are competing for the starting job. That's an indictment of Smith, who was expected to be a franchise quarterback as a No. 1 overall pick. The tough times worsened for him last year. His season was cut short by a shoulder injury—he played in only seven games—and he had a falling out with Nolan over how the injury was handled. After Smith tried to play through the pain and struggled mightily, he became upset that Nolan didn't defend him and seemed to question his toughness.

At this point, Smith's career can be summed up in one word: *disappointing*. Only his second season, 2006, when he started all 16 games, passed for 2,890 yards and had 16 touchdowns and 16 interceptions, offered a glimpse of hope. Facing a make-or-break season, Smith is looking for the same

Martz doesn't buy it. Instead, he hopes Smith has learned valuable lessons from Mike McCarthy, Norv Turner and Jim Hostler, the coordinators who preceded him.

"Alex has been exposed to a lot of things, and if he's smart he should have gleaned a lot from that," says Martz. "When you get into one system and that's all you know, you're missing a lot of things."

"In a way this will be hard because Alex doesn't know what to expect. He's been through an awful lot, and it's probably tempered him a great deal. Alex's biggest issue isn't his physical ability, his ability to learn or what has happened in the past. It's his ability to know what he's looking at with his eyes—the decision-making process. That just takes reps and getting confidence."

Chemistry between Martz and Smith seems to have already developed. During May minicamps and June OTAs, Smith won praise for reading defenses more accurately and getting rid of the ball quicker.

"He's doing things in practice I haven't seen him do before," says Nolan. "For instance, putting the blitz on his shoulders and getting the ball to the receiver real quick, instead of going back and hoping the protection has picked it up."

Does that mean Smith will enter training camp with the edge? "I wouldn't go there right now," says Nolan.

THE FIELD

At times, Martz sounds like a maestro who can't get the orchestra to play fast enough. "Turn it loose," he says after Smith hesitates to throw a pass in a minicamp seven-on-seven drill.

Martz watches every play like a hawk, trying to make sure each is run precisely the way he wants. So much of his offense is based on timing, taking exact drops and throwing the football well before a receiver makes his final break, and he wants players to react instinctively. In his system, he who hesitates throws interceptions or is sacked. Ask Detroit's Jon Kitna, who was sacked more than any NFL quarterback last season.

"You don't wait for that receiver to come clean," says Martz. "That ball has to be gone. If you're not sure and you're afraid you're going to throw a pick, you won't turn it loose. It's a trust issue that takes all spring, summer and training camp to solidify. If you're going to throw a pick, go ahead and throw it in practice. Then we can all talk about what hap-

To find out where the 49ers—and all the other teams—are slotted in our conference quarterback rankings, see pages 48 and 49.

Hill is climbing the QB ladder

After waiting the better part of six years for his first NFL start, **Shaun Hill** will not surrender easily to Alex Smith or J.T. O'Sullivan.

Hill is an unlikely challenger in the three-way battle to become the 49ers' starting quarterback. Undrafted in 2002, Hill made the Vikings as a free agent. But through four seasons in Minnesota and the 2006 season in San Francisco, his regular-season action consisted of two kneel-downs.

Hill finally got his shot last season, when Alex Smith separated a shoulder and backup Trent Dilfer suffered a concussion. Hill got the next two starts and led the 49ers to wins in both games. A back injury sidelined him for the season finale, but Hill finished with 54 completions in 79 attempts for five touchdowns and one interception, plus one rushing touchdown.

That performance earned Hill a new three-year contract. Earning the starting job would be an even bigger thrill. "We all know only one guy can start," says Hill. "We're all trying to be the guy." —Clifton Brown

much pressure off the passer. Third-and-6, you have the option to run with a player like Frank, with the realistic possibility that you can just hand him the ball and get a first down."

Martz also will take advantage of Vernon Davis' speed, a luxury he has never had at tight end.

"I'm running vertical a lot more, using my speed to get down the field," says Davis. "People say the system is hard, but if you put time into it, you can make it as easy as possible. Martz, he'll get the most out of you."

THE BOTTOM LINE

There are valid reasons to doubt that Martz will succeed. He does not have a proven quarterback. The coaching staff is under fire. The 49ers have not had a winning season since 2002.

And his work in Detroit wasn't particularly impressive. The Lions scored 32 offensive touchdowns in 2007, only two more than they had in 2006, and Kitna tied for the league lead in interceptions (20). Overall, the Lions were 19th in the league in total offense, up three spots from the year before.

But Martz frequently points to his first season as the Rams' offensive coordinator in 1999 as a reason for optimism. The numbers are staggering. The Rams scored 526 points on the way to winning

Super Bowl 34. The year before, the Rams had scored just 285 points, and their chumps-to-champs story made Martz the hottest coordinator in the league, the mastermind behind *The Greatest Show on Turf*.

"I don't think an offensive coordinator has ever had a bigger impact on a team in one season," says Vermeil, who gave Martz free rein to work his magic. "We wouldn't have won a Super Bowl without him. It's that simple."

Nolan has given Martz the same freedom he had with the Rams, so 49ers fans should prepare for surprises aplenty. "He used to make my rear end pucker," says Vermeil of Martz's play-calling.

The difference now is that Martz's reputation is on the line, along with the fortunes of a former No. 1 draft pick and a fourth-year head coach. That's a fair amount of pressure but nothing Martz didn't experience during his six years as Vermeil's successor.

"I was on the hot seat the first day I became head coach in St. Louis," he says. "I just didn't realize it. Usually, it's unspoken. But if somebody wants to say it, so what? Yeah, I've been on the hot seat since the day I took this job."

Sounds like another fourth-and-goal situation, the kind of moment Martz relishes. He can almost taste the redemption. **SN**

ded a face-lift. So Nolan called Martz.

pened, and by game time it won't happen again."

Martz will not tinker with any of the quarterbacks' throwing motions, choosing instead to harp on their footwork, timing with receivers, decision making and deception. Martz wants them to do a better job of looking one direction before throwing another direction, which helps create seams in the secondary that receivers can exploit.

"There's a reason for everything you do with your eyes," he says. "It's just imperative that you understand where you're throwing the ball and where your eyes should be looking. You can create opportunities just with your eyes."

Martz will tweak some of his philosophies to mesh with the 49ers' talent. The team acquired Bruce during the offseason, largely because he can be an on-field coach. The 49ers hope Bruce's familiarity with the system will help Arnaz Battle, Bryant Johnson and Ashey Lelie take full advantage of a system in which wideouts are featured.

Frank Gore, who has rushed for a combined 2,797 yards the past two seasons, is being counted on heavily despite Martz's love of the forward pass. For one, Gore can catch the ball. And the spread formations will offer huge gaps for Gore to exploit.

"Frank Gore is going to love this offense," says Martz. "I've always been pragmatic about looking at what you have and using it. Frank is an elite back in the prime of his career. A player like that takes so

Davis is ready to crash Martz's pass party

Vernon Davis has yearned for a bigger role in the 49ers' offense.

Consider his wish granted.

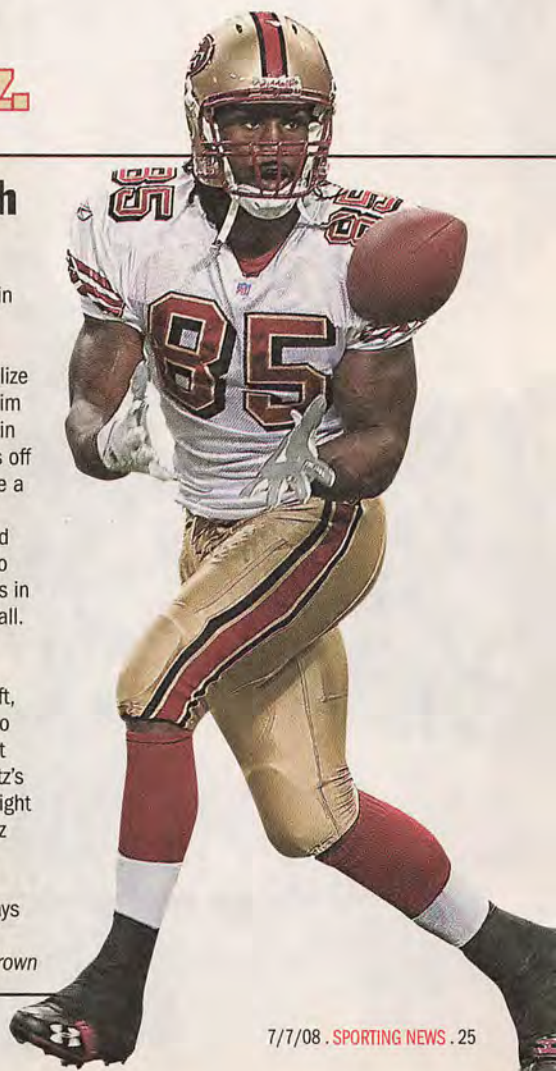
Mike Martz plans to find creative ways to utilize Davis' pass-catching ability at tight end. Line him up wide. Line him up in the backfield. Put him in motion. Send him on deep patterns. Nothing is off the table in Martz's offense, and Davis will have a full plate.

"Coach Martz said he's never had a tight end who can get downfield like me," says Davis, who had 52 catches and four touchdown receptions in 2007. "Every receiver wants to catch the football. Coach Martz's offense should give me that chance."

Davis, the sixth overall pick of the 2006 draft, has been studying pass routes run by Rams Pro Bowl receiver Torry Holt and new 49ers wideout Isaac Bruce, both of whom have played in Martz's system. And because the 49ers have another tight end with excellent hands, Delanie Walker, Martz keeps coming up with more options, such as two-tight end sets.

"Whatever Coach wants me to do, I'll do," says Davis. "But it's pretty clear I'll be doing more."

—Clifton Brown



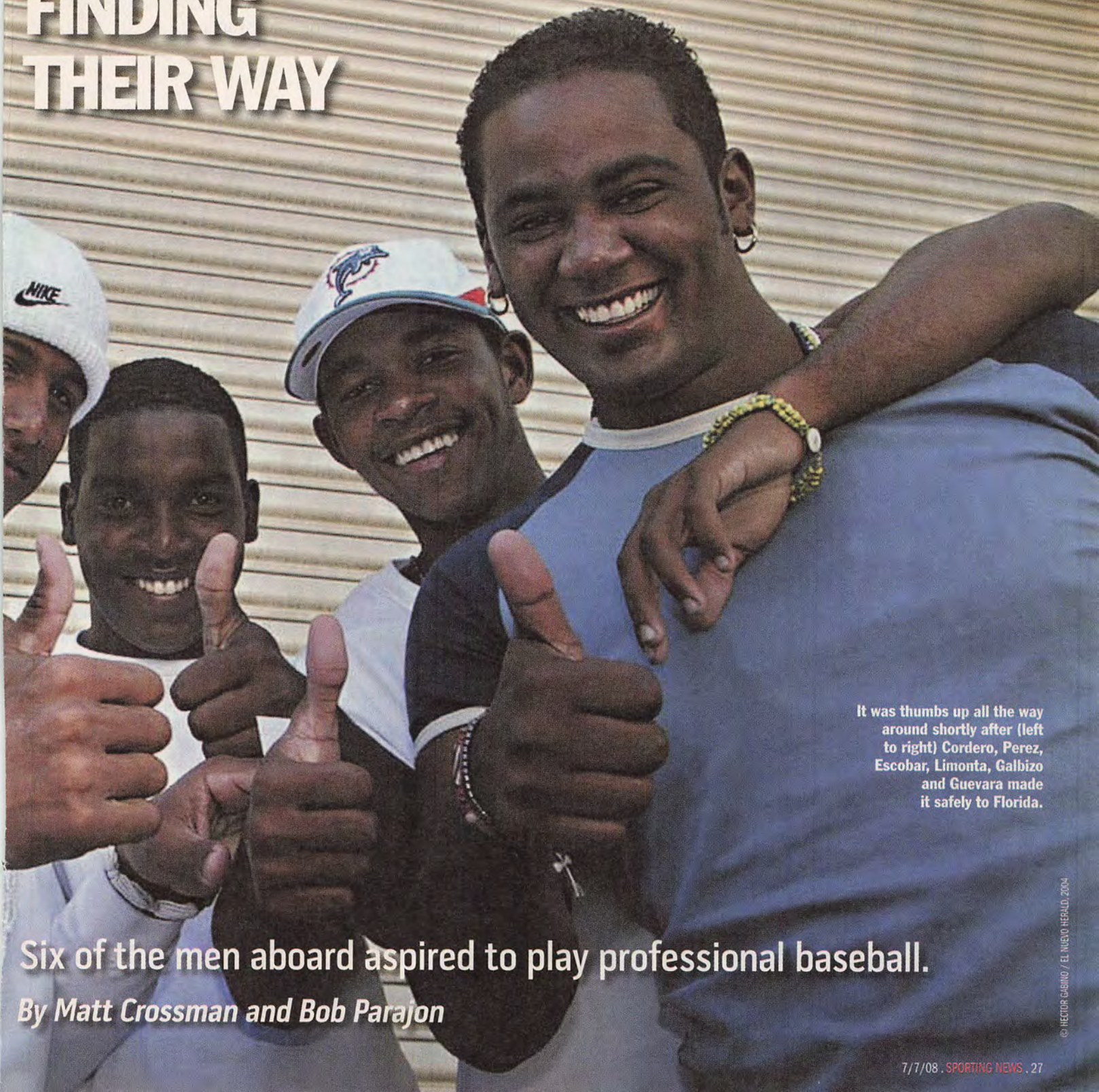
A photograph of three young Black men, likely Cuban immigrants, smiling and giving thumbs up. They are wearing white tank tops and are positioned in front of a light-colored, horizontally-slatted background, possibly a boat's interior or a wall. The man on the left is wearing a white tank top and has a small earring. The man in the middle is wearing a light blue tank top. The man on the right is wearing a white tank top and a white beanie.

BASEBALL

ADRIFT BUT STILL

On October 9, 2004, a boat carrying 36 Cubans reached Florida.
This is their story of danger, intrigue and hope.

NO MORE, FINDING THEIR WAY

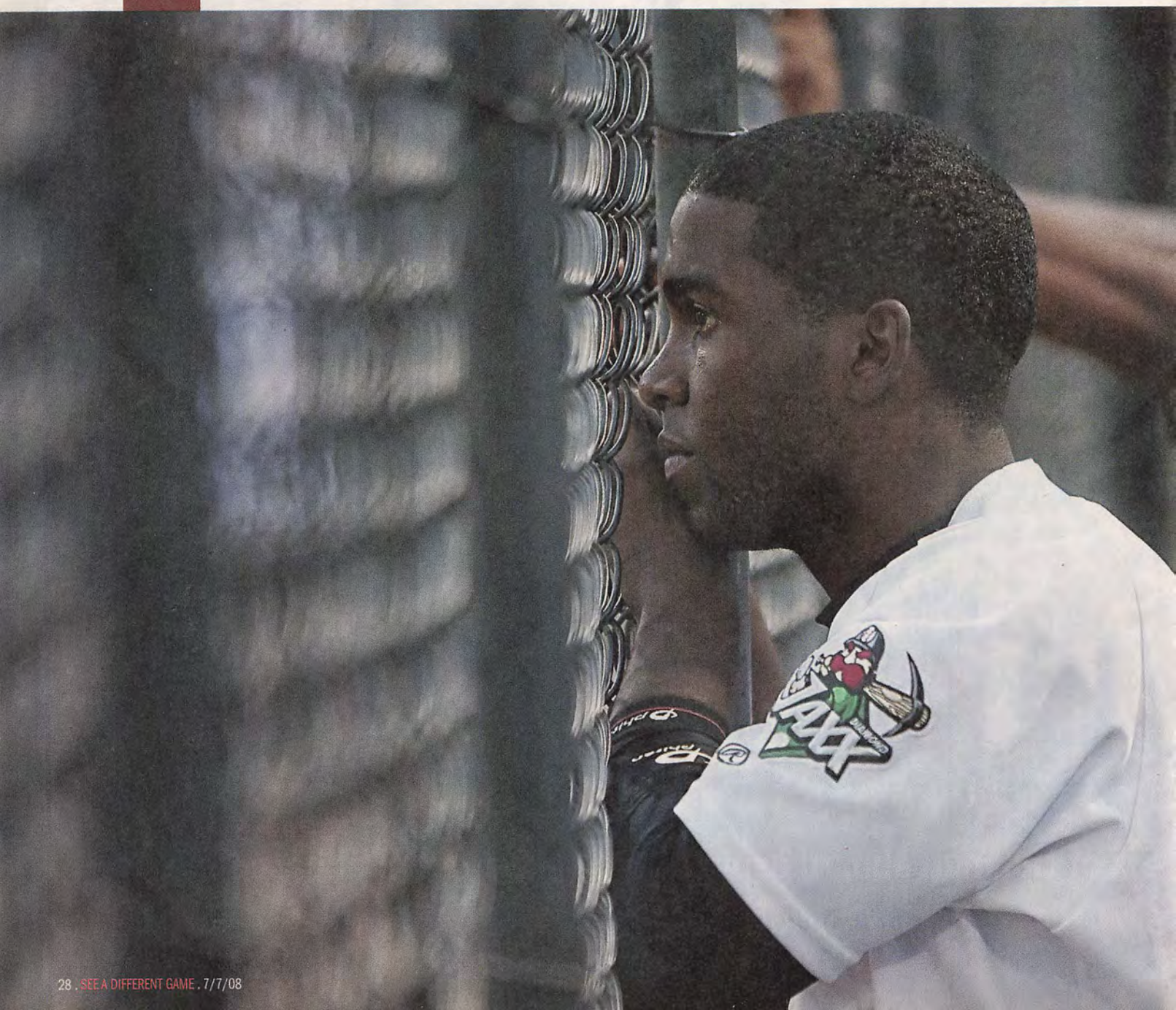


It was thumbs up all the way around shortly after (left to right) Cordero, Perez, Escobar, Limonta, Galbizo and Guevara made it safely to Florida.

Six of the men aboard aspired to play professional baseball.

By Matt Crossman and Bob Parajon

Two months before the worst two nights of his life, Yunel Escobar was a frustrated baseball player in the Cuban National Series, Cuba's equivalent of major league competition. He could see his future, and that was the problem. There wasn't much of one. He had been passed over for the Cuban National team, the elite squad that plays in international tournaments, and his baseball career had stalled, if not started going backward.



It was 2004, and though he was just 21, Escobar had already spent four years with the Industriales, the closest thing Cuban baseball has to the Yankees. But he was told he would be sent to a developmental league. "Those things started to upset me," he says. "My mom and dad were very sad. Until one day, I said, 'I don't think I have a future here, Dad. I've got to find my future somewhere else.'"

Jose Cordero, a pitcher and longtime friend of Escobar's, had come to the same conclusion. He, too, had had enough of baseball in Cuba. Eventually they learned they were thinking the same thing: They wanted to defect.

Over the course of two months, Escobar and Cordero spread the word among a group of baseball-playing friends. Four other guys agreed to join them—outfielder Joel Perez, pitchers Rafael Galbizo and Yamel Guevara and first baseman/outfielder Johan Limonta. A member of the group contacted someone in the

United States who could arrange to have them smuggled out of Cuba.

The six men—five were in their early 20s and one was 19—had known one another since childhood. They could trust one another with their dangerous secret amid the iron-fisted rule and closed society of the Castro regime, which doesn't tolerate dissenters or defectors. Details of the planning of their journey had to be (and must remain) secret to outsiders because the players didn't want friends and family staying in Cuba to have to answer for their escape. "The days are filled with worry, with nerves, with desperation, because you can't talk to your family, you can't talk to anyone," Limonta says. "You can't tell anyone anything."

The boat would leave October 6. They had to be on it.

Two weeks before the worst two nights of their lives, the six ballplayers fled their homes. They ran away to stay in a forest. After they had spent about 10 days

They had known one another since childhood. They could trust one another with their dangerous secret. The boat would leave October 6. They had to be on it.



Limonta's career is advancing—he's now in Class AA—but he often reflects on what it took to get there.

there, the rendezvous point changed. They hitchhiked several hundred miles to the west, traveling by truck in a journey that took roughly 4½ hours. The first 10 days, they had stayed in what they described as huts; now they were exposed. During the day, the sun cooked them. At night, mosquitoes devoured them.

Two days before the worst two nights of their lives, they had to make another journey. "We had to cross a river about 50 meters wide," Cordero says. "Then hide in a little key. Two days there with nothing to eat."

At least one of the players slept in a tree. "We were hidden in the woods and even slept one night in a swamp, where there were about a million mosquitoes per person," Perez says. "It was very stressful. We had to sleep there, next to crabs."

And the worst was yet to come.

As much as Escobar had thought about defecting, as much as he had planned it, as much as he had daydreamed about the aftermath—becoming a star in major league baseball and playing against the greatest players in the world—he says he had never thought about the boat trip. He hadn't considered the chance he'd get caught, he hadn't thought he might drown, he hadn't thought about the waves or the sea or the sharks that were in it. He figured he'd get onboard and in a snap, he'd be in Miami. "Since I was only 21 at the time, I still didn't know what danger was," he says.

The boat trip taught him.

At about 8 p.m. on October 6, 2004, the six baseball players and 30 other people climbed aboard the boat, which has been described as a 25-footer and a 38-footer. They carried with them only the shirts on their backs and the anxiety of leaving

their families behind. Limonta and Cordero had the added burden of grief—each was mourning the recent death of a family member.

"The day the ship arrived, there was stormy weather," Cordero says. "There were waves that were 12 to 18 feet high, and they broke one of the motors on the boat. We had to spend an extra day at sea so the storm would pass because if we tried going through with those waves, we might have gotten picked up by the Cuban Coast Guard, who was checking the area for boats."

For the first time, Escobar realized the danger he had put himself in. "There was a moment at sea when I said, 'I don't think we're going to make it.'"

Children's screams pierced the air. The six players stood together throughout

'Wet foot, dry foot'

The U.S. government generally follows a "wet foot, dry foot" policy—an unofficial title for an unofficial policy that a Border Patrol official borrowed from a Dr. Seuss book. If a boat of defecting Cubans is intercepted at sea, those aboard are sent back to Cuba. From 2004 until last week, 11,105 Cubans were caught and returned home, according to the Coast Guard. If a boat makes it to land, the people on board are allowed into the country. After a year and a day, they are eligible to become permanent legal residents. —Matt Crossman

the trip. Destination: the Florida Keys. Escobar remembers a 1-year-old. Perez recalls three boys and a girl, ages 5 to 11. Cordero can see, in his mind's eye, two boys, 5 and 7. Everyone around the players vomited. If the waves didn't make the passengers throw up, if the people around them throwing up didn't make them throw up, the overpowering smell of gasoline did. Escobar—a proud man—admits he vomited.

For two days and two and a half nights this went on. There was no food and no water.

And sharks circled the boat.

"To see those sharks so close nearby, it would scare anybody," Perez says. "The boat had to get out of there in a hurry because it really started to get ugly."

Everyone was exhausted, physically and emotionally. The boat, slowed by the weather, finally hit

land at about 1 a.m. on October 9. "Nobody wanted to get out," Perez says. "We didn't know where we were." He worried the boat had done a giant circle and arrived back in Cuba. "The guys driving the boat said, 'We're here,' but nobody wanted to get out because we were all scared—still from the sharks. And then we had to jump in the water."

What if it was Cuba? What if the players waded ashore and Fidel Castro's border guards met them?

It was not Cuba. It was the United States.

Their journey was still not over. There were sharks waiting for the men in Miami, too.

Media coverage at the time called their arrival the biggest defection of players since Castro assumed control of Cuba in 1959. One report predicted Guevara, a hard-throwing righthanded pitcher, would draw the most interest from big league clubs. In interviews after arriving, the players harshly criticized the state of baseball in Cuba.

Here, the story turns weird. Details of the months following their arrival are difficult to flesh out because of the seeming nefariousness of what transpired. From October until June, the players stayed with a man in Miami. He provided the players with spikes, gloves, food, a place to stay and the opportunity to practice.

But this was not an act of generosity. Who was this man? Different accounts say he was one of the smugglers, that he hired the smugglers and that he paid the smugglers when the players didn't have the money to pay for themselves.

Sources say he wanted to be paid for his role in getting the players into the country and that he wouldn't let the players leave his property until he was.

The man tried to recoup the money by holding what amounted to an auction for the players. Joe

Kehoskie, who has represented many Cuban and other Latin American players, says he received a phone call within 72 hours of the players' arrival. He flew to Miami and went to the man's house.

Kehoskie talked with two men he believes were the smugglers. They demanded \$150,000, up front, to allow him to represent the players. A law enforcement source puts the going rate to get one person out of Cuba at \$10,000. Baseball players cost more.

Kehoskie refused. He and others say more agents were offered the deal. None paid. Kehoskie describes the relationship between the man and the players as effectively a hostage situation and the \$150,000 as a ransom.

The players won't talk about that time in any detail. Escobar describes the relationship with the man positively. "He helped us a lot," Escobar says. The full truth of what happened might never be known. But this much is not in dispute: From October until June, Perez, Galbizo, Cordero, Guevara, Limonta and Escobar practiced and worked out, both at the man's house and at fields around Miami. Word spread about them. They rounded up other players, many of whom had recently been cut by big league teams. Eventually there were enough players to stage games in front of scouts. The man apparently viewed showcasing Escobar as the best way to get his money back. In at least one game, a scout who was there says Escobar led off every inning.

Eight months after the worst two nights of their lives, the players' paths began to diverge. Guevara was allowed to go to the Dominican Republic, where he could avoid the 2005 amateur draft and hope to sign a big free-agent contract. The five others also were set free—whether any of the players paid for that freedom is unclear—but they opted to become available for the draft. And one incredible story became six incredible stories.



The players, all from Havana, first went to the province of Villa Clara, the original exit point. When the plan changed, they hitchhiked to Pinar del Rio, where the boat awaited them.

The timeline

Compiled by Matt Crossman

August 2004: The six players begin to discuss defecting.

Late September-early October 2004: The players spend two weeks hiding in the woods and swamp.

October 6, 2004: The players, and 30 others, board a boat in Cuba.

October 9, 2004: The boat arrives in the United States.

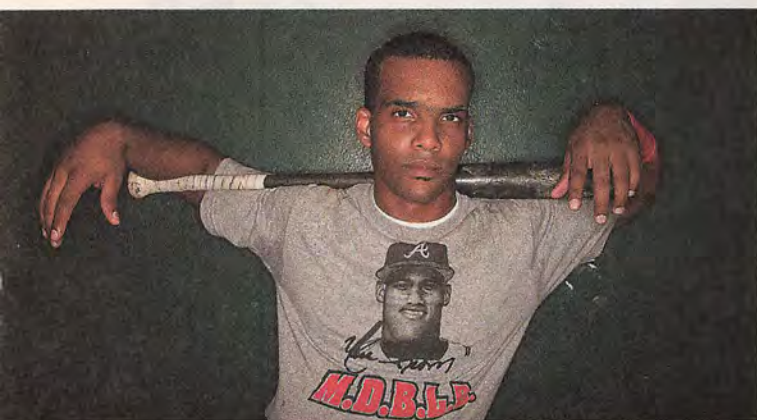
October 2004-June 2005: The players work out and practice, then attend workouts with teams and meet with agents and scouts. They live with a man who provides room and board and baseball equipment but who, according to sources, won't let them leave until he is paid for getting them into the country.

June 2005: Joel Perez, Rafael Galbizo, Jose Cordero and Yunel Escobar are chosen in the amateur baseball draft; Johan Limonta is not. Yamel Guevara is not eligible because he has left the United States to become a free agent. Only players who live in the United States, Canada and U.S. territories are subject to the draft.

August 2005: Perez, playing for the Yankees' Gulf Coast rookie league team, wraps up what proves to be his only pro season.

February 22, 2006: Cordero gets married. He and his wife now live in Puerto Rico and have a 21-month-old daughter.





Perez, sporting an Escobar T-shirt, wasn't able to emulate his fellow defector's rise but still plays a little ball on nights and weekends.

The one whose pain continues

After all the players went through just to play baseball in the United States, it would be heartwarming if each suited up and started hitting the ball all over the place or blowing fastballs past unwitting hitters. But that didn't happen.

Joel Perez was the first to see his baseball career end. After being drafted by the Yankees in '05, he played one year of rookie ball in Tampa—he was a member of the Gulf Coast League playoff champions—and was released. He moved to Miami, where he worked for a while as a personal trainer. Perez now works for a company that helps the disabled, and he plays baseball at night and on weekends.

He lives alone, though he has relatives in the area. Leaving his family behind was the hardest part of deciding to defect: "It was the only thing that made me question my decision—leaving my mother and father behind without knowing when or if I'd get to see them again. That upset me a lot. When I got here, I suffered with that for a long time. But when I talk to them on the phone, they try to reassure me (that I made the right choice)."

The one with Cuban flair

Separating fact from fiction in Cuban defection stories is difficult. The truth is malleable. Stats are embellished. Backgrounds are fabricated.

Rafael Galbizo, a hard-throwing righthander, was drafted in the 20th round in 2005 by the Marlins. He brought to the mound verve and energy, passion and fire. What Galbizo did not bring was much of what was in his bio. He did not attend the University of Miami, and he was not, by any stretch, 6-1, 185. "I'm 5-6," says Amanda Williams, public relations director for the Class A Greensboro (N.C.) Grasshoppers, for whom Galbizo pitched in 2006. "And standing next to him, he's not much taller than I am."

But he pitches like a much larger man. He's thick across the trunk and has big, if not terribly long, legs. From there springs his power.

"His goal was to put three digits on the gun," says George Sisson, assistant general manager at short-season Jamestown (N.Y.), where Galbizo pitched in '05 and '07. "He just gets on the mound and gets right after you. He liked to pump his fist when he got a strikeout. He'd look at the umpire. He was never afraid to ask if he was sure about that."

Galbizo was either unhittable or unable to get anybody out. Combine that inconsistency with a velocity drop—from the 90s into the 80s, as one person who saw him throw recently said—and he didn't have much of a chance. The Marlins released him this spring, and though he has attended at least one workout in front of scouts, he didn't sign with a team and hasn't been heard from since.

Galbizo's energy and passion were put on hold this spring when the Marlins let him go.



June 2006: Limonta is chosen by the Mariners in the amateur draft.

August 6, 2006: Limonta hits a walkoff home run for the Class A Wisconsin Timber Rattlers. Cordero is a member of the opposing Beloit team, and he congratulates Limonta when they get together the next day.

August 7, 2006: The night after Limonta's heroics, Cordero wins his first U.S. professional game with three perfect innings of relief against Limonta's team. Limonta is among those retired by Cordero.

October 29, 2007: Atlanta trades Edgar Renteria to Detroit. The move shows the team's confidence in Escobar, who becomes its starter at shortstop.

June 2, 2007: Escobar makes his debut with the Braves. He collects two hits and knocks in the game-winning run against the Cubs with an eighth-inning double.

June 6, 2008: Pitching in relief for the Lancaster (Pa.) Barnstormers of the independent Atlantic League, Guevara—who the month before had become the father of twins—gets the first win of his career in the United States.

Spring 2008: The Marlins organization releases Galbizo.

March 30, 2008: On opening day in Washington, Escobar meets President Bush.

May 5, 2008: Limonta is promoted from Class A High Desert to the Class AA West Tenn Diamond Jaxx. He homers in his first start two days later.



The one you'd want to have a beer with

The only thing that surprised Jose Cordero when he arrived in Florida nearly four years ago was ... everything. From breakfast to cars, TVs and DVDs, everywhere he looked things were different—better, bigger, more readily available. Especially when it came to baseball.

"In Cuba, you'll get a glove that's a few years old, a pair of spikes that should have been thrown out a couple years ago," he says. "And here you've got two or three pairs of spikes and two gloves, three caps, five practice jerseys."

Cordero, a power pitcher, was drafted in 2005 by the Twins in the 44th round (1,329th overall) after he impressed the team during a workout in Fort Myers, Fla. "This young man had some size, velocity. He had arm strength," says Jim Rantz, the Twins' minor league director.

Though Cordero's numbers were decent, the Twins organization had too many pitchers and not enough spots to put them in, so he was released after the 2006 season. Since then, Cordero's baseball career has rocked and rolled like the boat ride that brought him here. In addition to being a Twin and a Snapper in the Minnesota system, he has been an Explorer, Bronco and Air-Hog in independent league baseball.

Cordero is a gregarious, outspoken man. His English isn't great, but it's good enough, and he is comfortable trying, at least. He is also willing to discuss details of the defection—a few of the others who made the trip are unwilling to say much because they are still too traumatized by the near-death experience or too worried about possible repercussions back in Cuba.

When Riley Gostisha, assistant G.M. for the Class A Beloit (Wis.) team, an affiliate of the Twins, picks up players at the airport, he typically asks them about their background as a way to pass the time on the drive. He got more than he expected with Cordero. In understandable but broken English, Cordero told Gostisha about his boat trip from Cuba. "It was like, 'Holy crap. You only see that in the movies,'" Gostisha says.

Cordero still hopes he'll land in the big leagues. But even if he doesn't, the travails haven't gotten him down, and he doesn't hesitate when he says he would do it all over again.

He misses his family, of course—he left behind two sisters, a brother and his parents. And the departure came amid heartache: "I had always said to myself that as long as my grandmother was alive, I'd never leave her," he says. "So after she passed away, I made my decision."

Though he hasn't seen his family in Cuba since he left, he has started his

own. He got married in early 2006. He joins his wife and 21-month-old daughter in Puerto Rico during the offseason.

The latest stop for Cordero: the Grand Prairie (Texas) AirHogs.



For Guevara, called 'by far' the most talented of the six players, things have brightened on the diamond and in his personal life.

The one making a comeback

At the time of the defection, the word on Yamel Guevara was that he was 6-3, 225, reached the mid- to upper 90s with his fastball and had two great breaking pitches. He had a 17-2 career record in the Cuban National Series and in 2002-03 went 10-0, held hitters to a .198 batting average and helped his team win the championship.

Kehoskie, the agent who was offered the auction deal, says Guevara was the "best by far" among the six. "I doubt you could find a defector who has gotten more bad advice than Guevara," Kehoskie says. "A guy like him should've been a millionaire four years ago."

Yet Guevara is the only one of the six who has not played an inning in the affiliated minor leagues. He hadn't even played in the United States until this year. Teams shied away from him because he had a sore shoulder, though it's not clear whether he hurt it before or after arriving in Florida.

"It hasn't turned out exactly as planned," Guevara says. "But I've got faith and hope that things will work out just fine."

They might, after all. About 15 months ago, he hooked up with Fred Ferreira, an agent who had been a scout and spent 30 years working for big league clubs. This spring, Ferreira arranged a tryout for Guevara with the Lancaster (Pa.) Barnstormers of the independent Atlantic League. Though he had not pitched anywhere in more than a year, Guevara hit 88 mph and won a job. Keith Lupton, the Barnstormers' senior vice president and director of baseball operations, says Guevara already has Class AA stuff and will improve by pitching regularly. "He looks like he could be a real good pitcher," Lupton says. "He just needs work."

Guevara has had several good outings and a few not so good ones—including one in which he gave up a grand slam to former big leaguer Carl Everett.

As Guevara's baseball career appears to have turned a corner, there also has been good news in his personal life. Around the time he signed with Lancaster, his wife, also a Cuban defector, gave birth to twins. "We always knew over here, if you're good and get a chance to play, you're going to have a better life," Guevara says. "This is the greatest country in the world."



Urged to show off his now-chiseled frame by his West Tenn Diamond Jaxx teammates in Jackson, Tenn., Limonta would rather grin than bare it.

The one you will root for

Just looking at Johan Limonta, it's easy to like him. He has loosey-goosey body language. By the way he walks—arms bowed at his side, a giddyup in his gate—he looks like Dontrelle Willis. No fewer than five people interviewed about Limonta call him “a good kid,” or something close to it. He has a giant, bright smile—the true beauty of which is how close to the surface the pain behind it is.

He wears his emotions. The joy on his face as he plays baseball is as evident as the sorrow in his voice when he talks about his family and his struggles after arriving in the United States. None of the other players hesitated when asked if they would defect again. Limonta took a long time to answer. And when he finally did, what he said was revealing: That he would do it again but that he'd do things differently.

Nothing turned out as he had hoped. After going undrafted in 2005, he enrolled at what was then called Miami-Dade Community College and played a season there. He drew the attention of Mike Tosar, a scout for the Mariners. “First and foremost was his makeup, his desire,” Tosar says. “Leaving the family behind, leaving his country, will tell you a little bit about his desire, his makeup, his focus, his dedication to the game.”

Limonta could play, too, and the Mariners drafted him in 2006 and sent him to Class A. But like many Cubans, he had put on weight after arriving, and at the end of last season, the team told him to get in better shape. If the boat trip was a life-defining moment, this was a career-defining one.

He changed his diet and worked out tirelessly in the offseason. The results blew the organization away. He lost 30 pounds. He stands 5-11, and at 195 pounds appears to be made of solid muscle. “He had the best conditioning of any player in camp,” says Greg Hunter, Seattle's director of player

development.

But Limonta started the 2008 season still stuck in Class A, at High Desert in the California League. Again, disappointment washed over him. But it didn't defeat him. “The coach said, ‘Don't worry. Just play hard.’ So I played hard,” Limonta says. “Then the coach called me to his office and said, ‘Thank you for everything because you're in AA now.’ I said, ‘Wow! That's nice.’”

Even that day was bittersweet. He would have to leave his host family, and in particular Brenda Coultas, who has become like a mother to Limonta. She speaks no Spanish, and he spoke only a little English when they met, but they grew close. The host family arrangement gave structure to his life, which had been lacking since he arrived in the United States. To have a place that feels like home to retreat to after a game—as opposed to a drab apartment with teammates as roommates—was a big deal. To have someone to obviously care for him, as Coultas does, was a big deal.

They still talk or text every day, and she listens to broadcasts of his games online. He flew from Miami to California last winter to spend Christmas with the Coultas family.

He calls her mom, and she considers him a son.

There's something else, too.

Shortly before he left Cuba, Limonta's mom had died.

The one who made it

In Cuba, Yunel Escobar played “for the love of the jersey,” as the Cuban saying goes. But he had a hard time loving the jersey. He says he grew up in a rough part of Havana and that baseball officials in Cuba thought he’d never amount to anything because of that. *Nobody good ever comes from that neighborhood.*

He loves his Atlanta Braves jersey. He’s already a good player, and he appears headed for full-fledged stardom.

The Braves drafted him 75th overall in 2005, and he sped through the minors. He reached the majors last summer, got into 94 games and batted .326. When Atlanta traded Edgar Renteria in the off-season, Escobar was entrusted with the starting shortstop position. That’s a dizzying ascension for a guy who four years ago was going nowhere in Cuban baseball.

But his fast rise didn’t come without a few waves. Escobar plays like a guy who defected from Cuba without thinking about the danger involved. He plays cocky. He plays with so much enthusiasm he bothers some people. It sounds ridiculous, but he gets criticized for enjoying himself too much. He doesn’t care what anybody thinks of him.

If he did, he’d stop whistling. He has cut it down, but old habits die hard. He has been doing it since he was a kid. “It rubs a lot of people the wrong way,” he says. “Some people might try to throw at you, or it might just bother other people.”

Even his teammates. Jeff Francoeur, the Braves’ right fielder, likes when the Braves play in a packed stadium because the crowd noise means he won’t hear Escobar’s whistling. “It’s loud and annoying, even from the outfield,” he says. (Francoeur laughed as he said it, which is not to say the whistling is not loud and annoying.)

Quirks and all, Escobar’s teammates rave about him. He hits for average and has some power. He has superb range, soft hands and a cannon arm. Francoeur says he hopes Escobar makes all the money he can because Escobar will put it to good use, helping others get out of Cuba. Third baseman Chipper Jones says Escobar, 25, has a huge heart and that American players “cannot fathom” what he went through to make the big leagues.

“He’s got the game,” Jones says. “Now go out and still play with that youthful exuberance. But act like you’ve done it before.”

Far more than that of the others, Escobar’s trip to America has ended in success. In addition to becoming an everyday player in the major leagues who looks to be a future star, he also has brought

Behind the story

Bob Parajon, *SPORTING NEWS*’ prepress director, conducted the interviews with the Cuban players in Spanish. Parajon’s parents defected from Cuba in 1965, and Parajon was born two days after their arrival in Florida.



Oblivious to the perils of the boat trip to the United States, Escobar plays with similar abandon. His enthusiasm can rankle opponents—and teammates—but no one doubts his many skills.

his family over from Cuba. And this is where six stories become one again.

The one dream they all share

When the players discussed their incredible journeys, they said baseball was a means to an end, not the end itself. The end is getting their families to the United States, and baseball was supposed to be the means by which they could afford it. Escobar’s mom, dad and sister now live in Miami, but the others’ close family members remain in Cuba, scraping for any bit of news about their sons, their brothers, their grandsons and granddaughters.

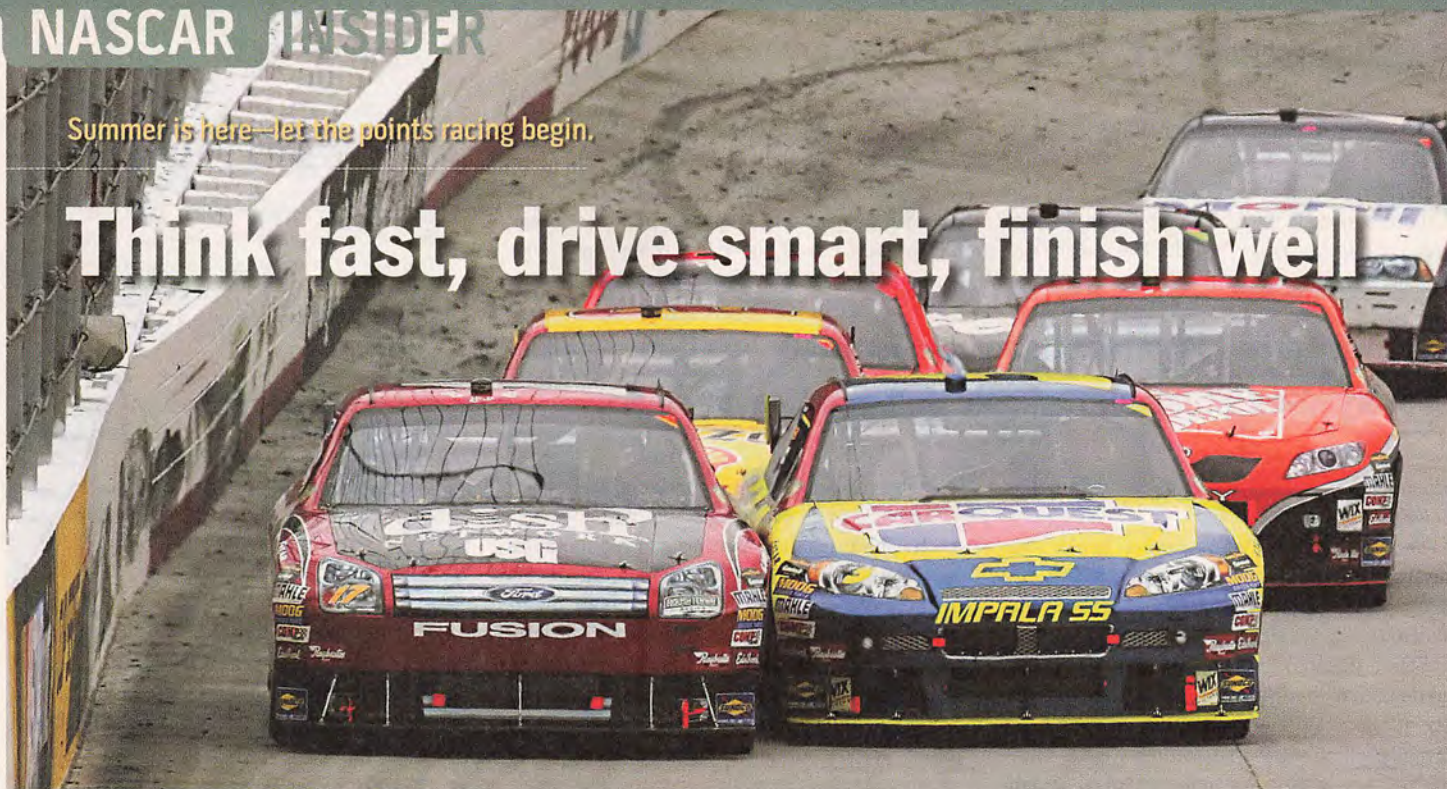
“I hope,” Perez says, “God willing, that we’ll all be able to get together again.” **SN**

A first: convicted for smuggling players

In April 2007, agent Gus Dominguez, a native of Cuba, was convicted of smuggling five players into the United States, the first such conviction of a baseball agent. According to prosecutors, Dominguez funneled \$225,000 through the bank account of Henry Blanco, a backup catcher for the Cubs and a Dominguez client, to a convicted drug dealer named Ysbel Medina-Santos. In return, prosecutors say, Medina-Santos—described by the *Los Angeles Times* as “a mastermind of smuggling logistics”—took five players on a speedboat from Cuba to the Florida Keys in August 2004. —Matt Crossman

Summer is here—let the points racing begin.

Think fast, drive smart, finish well



Kenseth (left) takes care of his car and gets solid finishes—he won the 2003 title that way, rallied to make the '05 Chase and is on the move again.

By Mike Hembree

NASCAR's long, hot summer is in full swing, and the Sprint Cup circuit will stretch from Florida to California with nine races over the next 10 weeks in the run-up to the Chase. Drivers and teams will be tested on two of the longest and toughest tracks (Daytona and Indianapolis) and two of the shortest and least manageable (Bristol and Richmond). There will be little time to rest.

But those who think everybody will be racing in heated pursuit of victories should think again. The real story of this part of the schedule will be

points racing.

Particularly for the drivers in the upper reaches of the standings—say the top five—winning races over the next couple of months will not be as important as finishing them. This tried-and-true approach worked even in the days before Brian France invented the Chase and tried somewhat awkwardly to fit the term *playoffs* into the NASCAR lexicon.

Drivers don't like to talk about points racing. NASCAR and track promoters won't talk about it. A promoter's selling point, no matter where the race falls on the schedule, is that every driver is trying his darndest to overcome the driver in the

position immediately above him. Tooth and nail. Gladiatorlike struggling. Life and death, almost.

That simply isn't the case. Once teams settle comfortably into the top rungs of the standings, it's to their advantage to think as fast as they race. If I can be almost guaranteed a fifth-place finish—and stay in the top five in points—by running *reasonably* hard, why should I bust my butt and my equipment and risk a points-killing wreck or a blown engine to finish second?

There is no better points racer than Matt Kenseth, though he'll never admit he's driving for anything except the win. Kenseth won his Cup title in 2003, the last season before the Chase,



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despite winning only one race. He had 25 top 10 finishes.

In 2005, Kenseth was 24th in the standings and 320 points outside the Chase cutoff with 12 races to go but rallied to make the field. This year, he was in 22nd, 204 points out of the Chase, after 10 races.

Not every driver is going to compete for every position in every given situation. It simply isn't practical or smart.

Seven races later, he is 13th and just eight points down.

"It's not whether you're trying harder—we always try as hard as we can," Kenseth says. "It's just that we've had less trouble, and we've been able to do our parts a little bit better lately."

Before the arrival of the Chase, someone figured out that, in most seasons, if a driver finished seventh in every race—no top fives, no wins, just sevenths—he likely would win the Cup championship. An enterprising reporter asked several drivers before the season if they would take that

deal—all sevenths, no wins, a guaranteed championship. All thought the question wasn't fair.

It isn't like such thinking is unique to NASCAR. Baseball teams that lock up division titles rest their best pitchers. Playoff-bound NFL teams play second-stringers in meaningless games. Not every driver is

going to compete for every position in every given situation. It simply isn't practical or smart.

The thing that the Chase has changed about this scenario involves, generally speaking, the drivers in the gray area from sixth to 18th in points. Entering this part of the season, they have to be both careful and cutthroat. A driver 15th in points, three positions and a hundred points out of qualifying for the Chase, might make a couple of risky moves late in a race to pick up 30 points and move closer to a spot in the Chase.

Meanwhile, points leader Kyle Busch rolls on in

speedreads

It's clear Joey Logano is ready to race in Sprint Cup. He has a win, three top 10s and two poles in his first four Nationwide Series races. If Tony Stewart stays with Joe Gibbs Racing, Gibbs should field a fourth car for Logano.

Daytona's changing cola sponsors for its summer night race has me all confused. Coke Zero 400? Doesn't sound right. The apocalypse will arrive if the Memorial Day weekend race at Charlotte is renamed the Pepsi 600. —Roger Kuznia

front of the sometimes awkward crowding behind him. With 50 bonus points tucked away because of his five victories, he can race to win without a lot of thought to the consequences, as long as he doesn't do anything remarkably stupid.

And that's one thing successful points racers aren't—remarkably stupid. **SN**



INSIDE DISH

After **Casey Mears** was told by Hendrick Motorsports he would not be back in the No. 5 in 2009, **Tony Stewart's** name was linked to the opening. The strongest rumored Stewart destination has been as owner-driver with Haas CNC. But would Smoke be interested in joining **Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson** and **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** at Hendrick? "Absolutely, absolutely," Stewart says. "You've got to.

There's nobody in this garage area that's not going to look in that direction." If Stewart joined Hendrick, that wouldn't make HMS the Yankees of NASCAR. It would make it the Beatles. > Strange but true: **Michael Waltrip's** second-place run last Sunday at New Hampshire was only his seventh runner-up finish in 706 Cup races. It was his 39th top five and his first since June 2005 at Pocono. He has four career wins. > Sprint Cup Series director **John Darby** has asked crew chiefs for feedback on the possibility of wide-open testing. Darby says NASCAR could move from its current restrictive policy—where the only tests allowed at tracks that host Cup events are the sessions conducted by the sanctioning body—to a no-holds-barred setup where teams would be allowed to test anywhere and anytime. That might tempt well-funded organizations to test every week with dedicated test teams, which likely would increase their advantage over organizations with limited resources. The consensus in the garage, though, is that the testing policy will stop short of that. "I think it's going to be that everything's on the table, but I don't think it will wind up there," **Joe Gibbs** says.

Stewart could be Ringo over at Hendrick Motorsports.

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*Source: NPD; 12 months ending November 2006.

Busch won't be the only hot topic in the second half

The kid can't keep it up, can he?

Well, why not?

In the first half of the season, Kyle Busch has made an emphatic statement, winning a Sprint Cup-best five races and grabbing the lead in the championship standings.

Now that the Cup Series is starting its cycle of return visits to two-race venues with the Coke Zero 400 at Daytona, Busch has no intention of letting up on his unrelenting message to Rick Hendrick—that the owner of the sport's premier organization made a mistake in dismissing him from the No. 5 Chevrolet at the end of last season to make room for Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s No. 88.

That Busch has found a comfortable home at Joe Gibbs Racing and instant chemistry with crew chief Steve Addington has done little to abate the bitterness that often bubbles to the surface when Busch talks about his former team. That his replacement in the No. 5 car, Casey Mears, has been told he won't be driving for Hendrick next year is little consolation.



The folks over at Hendrick Motorsports didn't expect Busch to be so happy this season.

With his first Cup victory on a road course two weeks ago at Infineon, Busch is on pace to win 10 races this season, the number defending series champ Jimmie Johnson notched for Hendrick

last year.

Busch's raised profile has shifted some of the limelight away from teammate Tony Stewart, who is looking at other opportunities, including team ownership. The persistent rumor has Stewart buying a piece of Haas CNC Racing and running his own team, with equipment and technical support from Hendrick.

Stewart, who has one year left on his contract at Gibbs, is the first domino in a game that also features Mears and other notable free agents such as Martin Truex (Dale Earnhardt Inc.) and Daytona 500 winner Ryan Newman (Penske Racing). If Stewart reaches an agreement with Gibbs on a release from his contract, the No. 20 Toyota becomes one of the most coveted rides in the Cup garage.

Also enticing is a fourth car at Richard Childress Racing, where Mears appears to be a leading candidate. And there's the question of who will replace Mears in the No. 5. It's all stuff to keep an eye on while waiting to see what Busch will do next. —Reid Spencer



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Pit Box

NASCAR experts Roger Kuznia and Reid Spencer size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box.
This week: Coke Zero 400

Who will win at Daytona?

7:30 p.m. ET Saturday, TNT

Roger: The sentimental pick is Dale Earnhardt Jr., but the smart pick is anyone in a Joe Gibbs Toyota. I'm going with Denny Hamlin, who looked strong early in the Daytona 500 before contact with Bobby Labonte on pit road started a string of misfortunes. Hamlin is an excellent restrictor plate racer.

Reid: Roger is right about Junior being the sentimental pick, and he's right about Joe Gibbs Racing producing the winner of the Coke Zero 400. As usual, however, Roger has the wrong driver. There's no stopping Kyle Busch right now, and he'll win the race he lost by 0.005 seconds to Jamie McMurray in 2007.

Last week: Roger picked Jimmie Johnson (ninth) and Reid went with Kyle Busch (24th), but it was Busch's brother, Kurt, who won at New Hampshire, his first victory of the season.

Ian Kinsler, Dan Uggla, Brandon Phillips and, of course, Chase Utley are flexing their biceps.

Second-rate power at second? Hardly

By Ryan Fagan

rfagan@sportingnews.com

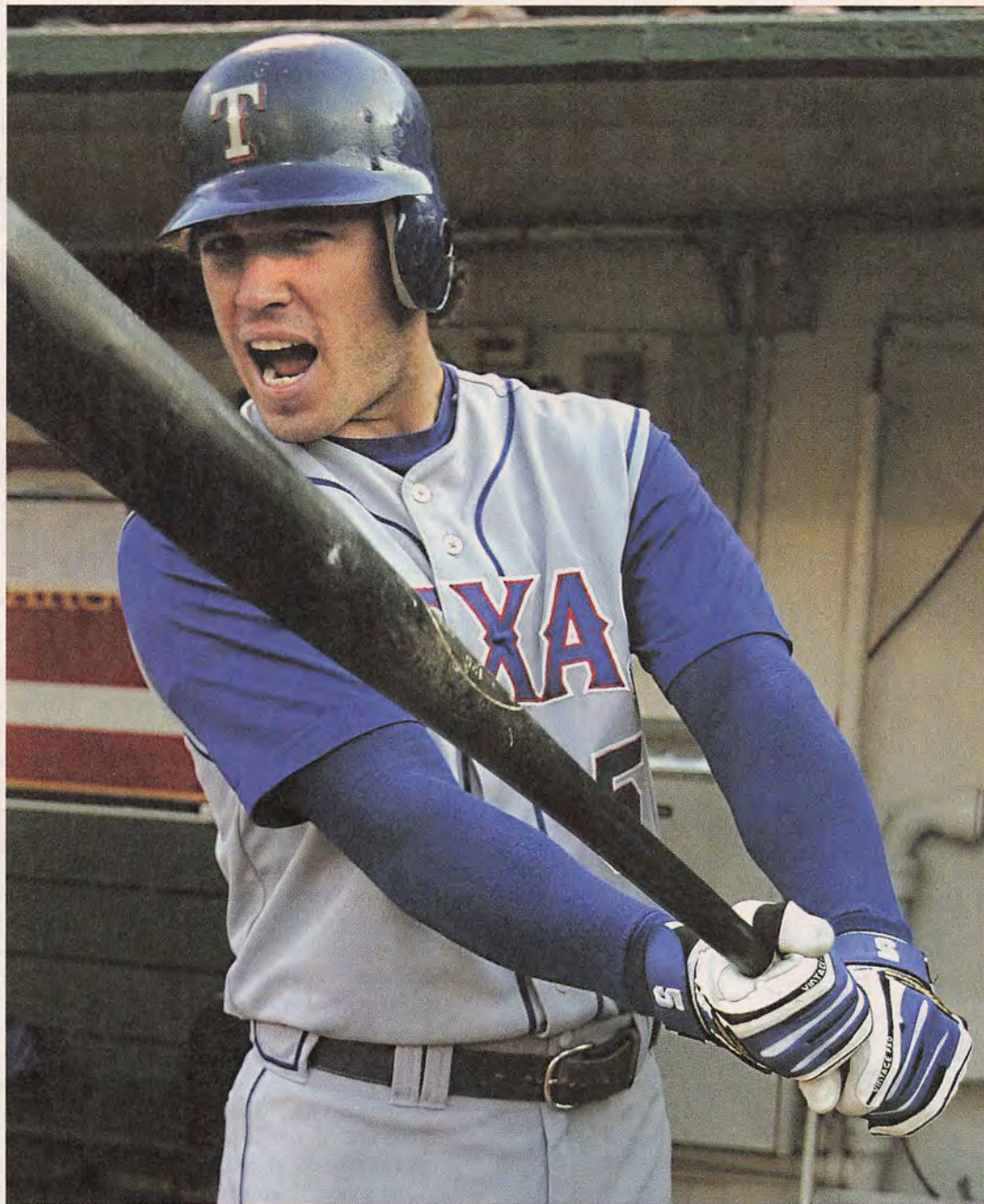
The makeshift nameplate over the locker was misspelled and the handwriting was sloppy, but Ian Kinsler got the good-natured point.

Kinsler had been given the day off against Blue Jays ace Roy Halladay, a brief rest for the second baseman who was leading the Rangers in homers and RBIs heading into that early-May contest last year. His replacement, Matt Kata, went 3-for-3 with three runs scored in the Texas victory, making it open ribbing season on Kinsler. "Wally Pip" had been scrawled atop Kinsler's locker, in reference to the Yankees first baseman who infamously took a day off and unwittingly gave young slugger Lou Gehrig his shot at stardom in 1925.

"I have no clue who did it," Kinsler said with a smile the next day. "Kata got his second hit and (bench coach) Art Howe came up to me in the dug-out and said I needed to change my first name to Wally. It was kind of an ongoing joke."

With Gehrig at first base, Pipp was sold to Cincinnati before the next season. Kinsler is in no such danger. In fact, he's among the second basemen who are changing the perception of a position that was, with a few exceptions, reserved for good-glove, decent-contact players. "For years, second base was a position of speed and leadoff hitters," one National League scout says. "Now we see leadoff hitters like Kinsler hitting home runs. I think it's just a cyclical thing, and that's why right now we have these second basemen hitting home runs."

Power at second used to be an afterthought, and Ryne Sandberg and Joe Morgan were once-in-a-generation types. That's not the case any longer—since 1974, when Stats LLC began tracking the statistic, the highest collective home run totals for second basemen have come in the past four



years. A similar position transformation happened on the other side of the infield about a decade ago, when baseball was introduced to a foreign concept—the power-hitting shortstop. Alex Rodriguez, Nomar Garciaparra, Derek Jeter and Miguel Tejada redefined a position that previously had been manned by only a handful of true sluggers,

Kinsler and his fellow second basemen are looking more and more menacing with a bat in their hands.

most notably Cal Ripken and Ernie Banks.

Back at second, Kinsler has 13 homers, 50 RBIs, 70 runs scored and a .318 batting average this season. "He's a little bit different hitter because he really hits off his back foot and his power is to the big part of the park, from left-center to right-center," the scout says. "When I've seen games in Texas, his home runs have basically been to center field. He benefits from a hitter-friendly ballpark, but still, he's a very good high-fastball hitter."

Reds second baseman Brandon Phillips hit 30 homers last year, and he has 13 in 2008. And then there are the U boys—Florida's Dan Uggla and Philadelphia's Chase Utley—who were tied for the major league lead with 23 home runs entering the week.

Uggla came to the Marlins as a Rule 5 draft pick in December 2005. He hit 27 homers as a rookie, then pounded 31 in 2007. After struggling out of the gate this season—he was hitting just .167

through 15 games—Uggla batted .413 with 12 homers in the next 29 games. "Early on in his career he showed power, but he's become a better hitter because he's become a little better breaking ball hitter," the scout says.

Uggla, Kinsler and Phillips have flown largely under the radar. Not so for Utley, the cog that makes the Phillies' offensive machine click. He has been in the top eight in the MVP voting each of the past two seasons. "He's the No. 1 guy right now," says former Phillie and Hall of Famer Mike Schmidt. "If you want to start a team, you might just start with him. You'd have to decide whether you'd want to start with A-Rod or Jeter or Chase Utley. For some reason, he always seems to be at the plate with the game on the line and he always gives you a really, really tough at-bat in those situations. He's what makes the team go."

Pretty high praise for a second baseman, isn't it? **SN**

speedreads

In his final 10 starts for the Astros before grabbing G.M. Ed Wade by the neck and throwing him to the ground, Shawn Chacon posted an ERA of 6.66. The phrase "good riddance" doesn't seem strong enough.

The N.L. West continues to confuse and astound. The D-backs are 11 games under .500 since May 18 but still lead the division by 2½ games. The Dodgers got no-hit last week but still won. The Giants are 11 games under .500, but Tim Lincecum is 9-1. The defending N.L. champion Rockies are playing .395 ball midway through their schedule. And the Padres are second-to-last in the majors in runs scored, but Adrian Gonzalez is tied for second in the N.L. in RBIs. Sheesh.

Aviles puts the short in shortstop but has been big at the plate.



One of the catalysts for the Royals' recent turnaround is rookie **Mike Aviles**, a 5-9 shortstop who has been a godsend to the offense. Manager **Trey Hillman** had to make a move at shortstop, where **Tony Pena**'s struggles at the plate were downright

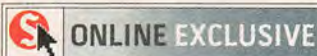
historic. A little perspective: Pena's OPS was .366 entering the week; no player has posted a worse full-season mark since **Frank O'Rourke** with the 1912 Boston Braves. Enter Aviles, a New York City-born player who collected his first hit at Yankee Stadium and hasn't stopped hitting since. He was batting .321 with 14 RBIs after 22 games, and more important, the Royals were 14-8 in those contests. "Mike's taking advantage, and I think one of his strengths is the way he carries himself with confidence," Hillman says. "He's not arrogant, but he's not carrying himself like a guy who just came up."

➤ The Phillies have lost just one game off their N.L. East lead despite muddling through 11 games of the most recent round of interleague play with only three wins. It helps that the Marlins were 4-8, the Mets 6-6 and the Braves 6-5 against American League teams. "Tampa Bay wore out Florida," says one N.L. scout, "and nobody's taking advantage of the interleague schedule in the East Division to really move up. This is where you can really make up some ground. It can really change the perspective of the race." ➤ RHP **Sidney**



Ponson's second opportunity with the Yankees started much better than the first one ended. He was released in 2006 with a 10.47 ERA, but last week Ponson showed the ability to work out of jams and turned in six scoreless innings against the

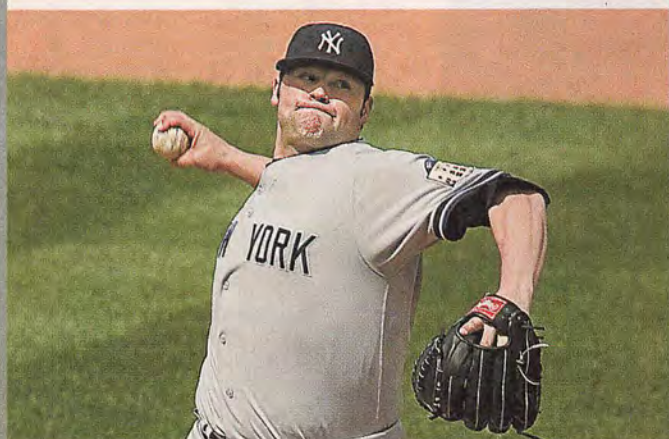
Mets. "It's a fresh start," Ponson told reporters after the game. But the Yankees, who have been crushed by injuries to their rotation, need Ponson to prove he can keep his head on straight. ➤ Remember **Dallas McPherson**? Wasn't too long ago that he was a rising star in the Angels organization, and it was supposed to be just a matter of time until he was mashing home runs in Anaheim. Injuries, as they tend to do, changed those plans. Now, McPherson is playing third base for the Marlins' Class AAA team in Albuquerque and hitting as well as he ever has. He recently homered in seven consecutive games and has 28 this season. He still strikes out too much—95 times in 248 at-bats—but he's hitting .310 and has a .422 on-base percentage. ➤ In the three starts since his very visible confrontation with batterymate **Dioner Navarro** on June 8, Rays RHP **Matt Garza** is 2-1 with a 2.05 ERA and 21 strikeouts in 22 innings. The highlight: a 10-strikeout, 1-hit game against the Marlins, which came one day after Fresno State, Garza's alma mater, completed its improbable run to the College World Series title.



Chris Bahr says it's no secret how Brett Myers, ranked 25th among fantasy starting pitchers entering the season, has become a player with no value. Get his take at sportingnews.com.

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from major league scouts



Yankees reliever-turned-starter Chamberlain has added a two-seam fastball that gives hitters that sinking feeling.

The heater is becoming a hot commodity

The fastball is making a comeback.

Four scouts—three of them with American League clubs—believe there are more pitchers with plus fastballs than there have been in about five years. That's still well below what staffs featured a generation ago, but it does represent progress.

When asked which starters have the best heaters, the scouts listed Boston's Josh Beckett, Cleveland's C.C. Sabathia, Houston's Roy Oswalt, Kansas City's Zack Greinke, San Francisco's Tim Lincecum, Seattle's Felix Hernandez and the Cubs' Carlos Zambrano.

Relievers mentioned: Boston's Jonathan Papelbon, Cincinnati's Francisco Cordero, Seattle's Brandon Morrow, the White Sox's Bobby Jenks and the Cubs' Carlos Marmol. A healthy Joel Zumaya of Detroit would normally be on the list, but the scouts want to see if Zumaya—who didn't pitch until June 20—has lost anything because of shoulder surgery.

And then there's the Yankees' Joba Chamberlain. Because of Chamberlain's changing role—he made his first big league start June 3 after 39 relief appearances dating to last season—the scouts put him in his own category.

"He is really, really special with that fastball," the N.L. scout says. "And he's just learning what to do with it."

Scouts say Chamberlain consistently throws 96 to 98 mph with his four-seam fastball. The pitch rides high and lacks movement, but hitters cannot catch up to it.

As a starter, Chamberlain has added a sinking two-seam fastball. He keeps that pitch in the bat-breaking low-90s.

"For me, Beckett, Chamberlain and Hernandez are the best when you're talking about fastballs," an A.L. scout says. "It's not just pure velocity. It's life, location and the ability to pitch with it deep into games. Beckett and Hernandez are still pretty firm with it in the seventh and eighth. I think Chamberlain can do that, too."

The scouts gave Papelbon high marks for his aggressiveness with the fastball. "He throws hard, and he doesn't mess around," another A.L. scout says. "He gets after hitters. I love to see that. We need more of that." —Gerry Fraley

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Franklin is the Cardinals' closer, but he's not a long-term solution.



The Cardinals are contending—despite a bullpen in distress

Few expected the Cardinals to challenge the Cubs in the National League Central. But, as the calendar turned to July, the Cards remained in the playoff race—even though their biggest problems have come in an area where Tony La Russa-managed teams usually excel: the bullpen.

St. Louis' interleague trip last week brought the relievers' erratic performance into focus. The team's 5-4 record was tolerable but could have been much better. The Cardinals held late leads in three of the losses—which made it nine games this season in which they led after seven innings and lost. All of last season, the Cardinals lost only two games when they led after seven innings.

"Coming into the season, there seemed like more questions about the starting pitching," says Ryan Franklin, who has been pressed into service as the closer, "but we're the ones who have fallen down."

The Cardinals had to overhaul the bullpen when veteran closer Jason Isringhausen went 1-5 with a 12.00 ERA from April 12 to May 15. Isringhausen went on the disabled list on May 16 after giving up three earned runs in a third of an inning the day before in an ugly loss to the Pirates. A week earlier,

after a tough defeat in Milwaukee, Isringhausen had injured his hand when he struck a television set in frustration.

Cardinals relievers rank first in the National League in holds with 58, but they have blown 19 saves, the most in the league. Other statistics speak to how that has happened: From the seventh inning on, St. Louis pitchers have a 4.71 ERA, .271 batting average against and a 1.51 WHIP, all last in the league.

Franklin has been reasonably reliable as the closer, saving eight games. But his ERA in that time is 4.32, and he has given up nine walks in 16⅓ innings. Compare that with his 3.04 ERA and 11 walks in 80 innings a year ago.

"They don't have that one guy out there," says an A.L. scout. "They've got some nice arms, but everybody is being pushed up a notch higher than they're used to and comfortable with."

Isringhausen is back from a rehab stint that was part physical and part mental, but a knee strain he suffered last week makes his reliability a question. La Russa says, "Izzy is my closer when he is ready." That is the move that could restore order and keep the Cards in the race. —John Rawlings and Gerry Fraley

The week ahead

July 4-6 A clash of fierce rivals

Starting with a series at Busch Stadium, the Cardinals and Cubs will play 12 games in the season's final three months. Cubs manager Lou Piniella likes to play on the quirks of boyhood friend Tony La Russa, the Cards' manager. If, for example, La Russa avoids pregame conversation because of superstition, Piniella will make a point of talking to him.

July 4-7 Welcome to the bandbox

The Mets have a solid plan for at least half of their four-game series in Philadelphia: They will start two pitchers who have had success at Citizens Bank Park. Lefthander Oliver Perez is 2-1 with a career 1.96 ERA at the cozy ballpark, and righthander John Maine is 2-0 with a 1.93 ERA. Maine is 4-0 with a 2.05 ERA in seven career starts against the Phillies.

July 7-9 Fenway mashers

History says Minnesota's Joe Mauer and Justin Morneau will do damage in Boston. Both have the type of lefthanded swing that is successful at Fenway Park, and since the start of the 2005 season they have combined to hit .349 there with a .635 slugging percentage in 63 at-bats.

July 7-10 Messing with Texas is daunting

John Lackey and the Angels head to Texas, and Lackey doesn't have a lot of luck in Arlington. In his one collegiate season at Texas-Arlington, coaches viewed Lackey chiefly as a first baseman. Now, even though Lackey is a standout pitcher, Texas hitters view him as hittable—at least at Rangers Ballpark, where the righthander is 4-5 with a 6.24 ERA in 12 career starts.

July 8-9 Bombed in the Bronx

Tampa Bay's two-game set at Yankee Stadium may be too long for the Rays' staff. Beginning in 2006, Rays pitchers have gone 8-14 with a 6.71 ERA in the Bronx. At least they won't have to worry about Yankees DH Hideki Matsui, who is on the disabled list. Matsui has a career .322 average against the Rays, with 76 RBIs and 19 homers in 95 games.

How the Sox have survived

When David Ortiz went on the disabled list with a damaged sheath that protects a tendon in his left wrist, it left a yawning gap in the middle of a powerful Red Sox lineup. It changed

the very nature of the team—and in a surprising way. Everybody in baseball understood that the team's defense might benefit from a reconfigured lineup, but no one could have

anticipated the offense would remain just as productive and that it even would fuel a rise in winning percentage. Here's how the Red Sox are doing it.



Crisp could eventually bring value in a trade, but for now, he'll help the Sox with his defense.

Defense: Faster is better

Manager Terry Francona has Coco Crisp, who was the subject of trade discussions in the spring, playing regularly in center field—a move that pushed Jacoby Ellsbury from center to left and Manny Ramirez from left to DH to take Ortiz's spot. The faster Crisp-Ellsbury-J.D. Drew outfield alignment covers more ground, and the Red Sox are benefiting. Crisp does not throw well, but the defense overall is better because he is more engaged defensively than Ramirez.

And with better outfield defense, Red Sox

pitchers have become more effective since Ortiz's injury.

	With Ortiz	Without Ortiz
Team ERA	3.99	3.54
Team WHIP	1.36	1.28

Even with fewer runners on base, the Red Sox are turning one double play every 14.1 innings without Ortiz in the lineup versus one every 14.6 innings with him playing.

Second half: Good to go

"I think Drew can take the pressure," says the major league scout. "He will produce hitting third as long as Terry needs him there."

Drew says, "I just have to keep doing what I do. I can't change to become David Ortiz. I just have to keep everything simple."

And Francona can live with that. "If a guy had to pick a time for this to happen ... the timing is impeccable," he says.

In the current situation, rookie Brandon Moss will continue to get more time as the No. 4 outfielder. "Moss is a fine outfielder, and he has a lot of potential," the A.L. scout says. "He can run, too, which gives them another weapon offensively."

But without Ortiz, the Red Sox will have less to offer if they go looking for pitching after the All-Star break. Crisp is the best chip they have to play, but the scout doesn't believe Moss is ready to be an everyday player—especially in a pennant race.

With this defense, though, the Red Sox might be able to get away without trading for an arm.

"If this goes until August, and it could with that kind of injury, the difference in defense will really show because of all the games they have on the road," says the A.L. scout.

"That lineup won't look bad to Terry at all." —John Rawlings

Offense: Drawing from Drew

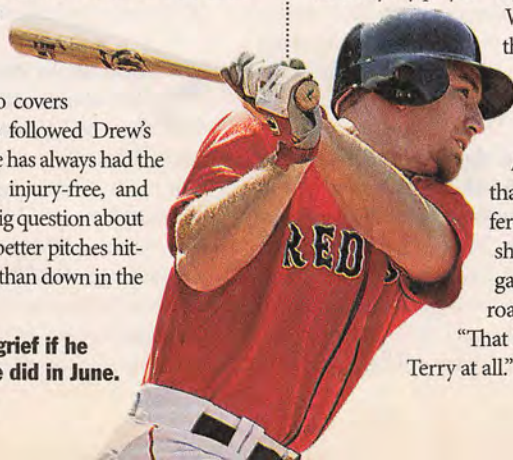
The biggest boost—and the biggest surprise—has come from the performance of right fielder Drew, who typically batted sixth or seventh when Ortiz was hitting third. When Ortiz left the lineup after a May 31 game against Baltimore, Drew moved into the third spot—and produced eye-popping numbers in June.

J.D. Drew	June	Before June
Hits	29	42
Extra-base hits	20	30
Home runs	11	4
RBI's	26	22
Average	.358	.282
OPS	1.377	.792

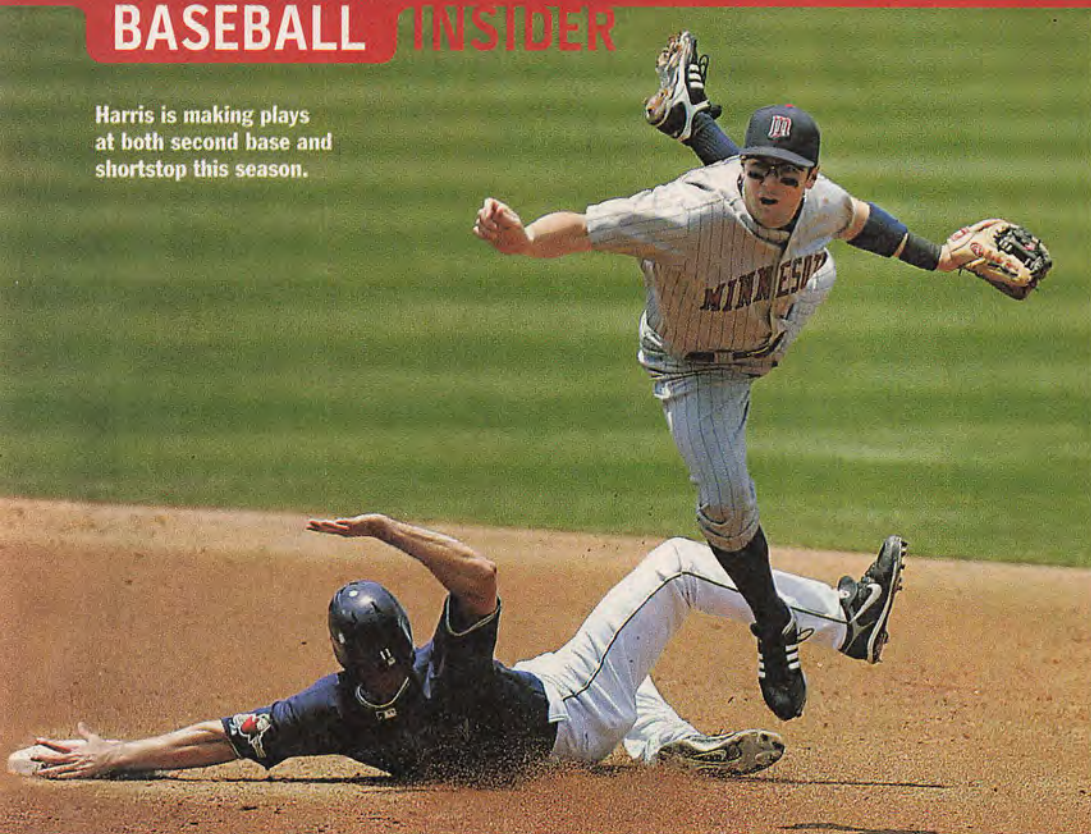
"I know the perception about him, especially among fans," says a scout who concentrates on A.L. teams. "I think he does play hard, but it doesn't show. I won't say he has maxed out his talent because a lot of people thought he had Hall of Fame potential."

Another scout, who covers both leagues and has followed Drew's career closely, says, "He has always had the talent. He has stayed injury-free, and that's always been the big question about him. He's getting a lot better pitches hitting in front of Manny than down in the lineup."

Drew won't get any grief if he produces the way he did in June.



Harris is making plays at both second base and shortstop this season.



5 things you need to know about ... Twins SS Brendan Harris

Brendan Harris blends right into a no-name Minnesota lineup that suddenly has the Twins on the heels of the White Sox in the A.L. Central. Harris, who started at second base for most of the first half of the season, had 12 hits in the team's recent 10-game winning streak.

1 Harris, 27, is a coach's son, so he has been around sports his entire life. He played basketball as well as baseball at Queensbury High in upstate New York and even considered trying to play college basketball. But given his 6-1 stature, "that decision was sort of made for me," he says.

2 He has no idea why he has never stayed in one organization for long. Despite a career .295 batting average and 64 home runs in the minors, Harris has been traded four times, most recently by the Rays to the Twins before this season. The Nationals included him in an eight-player deal with the Reds for Austin Kearns in July 2006, and he was one of eight players involved in the four-team 2004 trade that sent Nomar Garciaparra from the Red Sox to the Cubs.

3 Harris, who had a single-season record 18 home runs and 69 RBIs in his senior year at William & Mary, majored in political science and minored in business. If not for baseball, he says, "I'd probably be a lobbyist somewhere." Politics is his off-field passion, and he owns a condominium in Washington, D.C. He's following the presidential race closely and regrets that the Twins will be on the road

during the Republican National Convention, which will be held in nearby St. Paul. "It's a big year," he says. "I love following the issues."

4 Harris is not a one-position kind of guy. He has started 86 major league games at second base, 120 at shortstop and a handful more at third base. As the Rays' regular shortstop in 2007, he hit .286 with 12 home runs, prompting manager Joe Maddon to promote him for All-Star recognition. "He doesn't have a glamorous name, but he gets the job done," Maddon says. With the Twins, Harris has split time this season as the starting second baseman (37 games) and shortstop (33).

5 After hitting only two home runs in his first 243 at-bats this season, Harris hit two in a three-at-bat stretch against the Padres last week. Ironically, both came against future Hall of Famers. The first, in the ninth inning off closer Trevor Hoffman, helped the Twins to a 3-1 victory that stretched their win streak to seven games. The next day, Harris provided a go-ahead 2-run homer off Greg Maddux in a 9-3 win. "I'm not going to sit there and say those were just another couple of home runs," he says. "There will be stars next to those." —*The Sports Xchange*

3 UP ▲

1 Tigers. Jim Leyland's crew entered the week at .500, thanks to a 16-4 stretch. But with right fielder Magglio Ordonez going on the disabled list, there's yet another challenge to overcome.

2 Jair Jurrjens. Righthander Edinson Volquez is the Reds rookie receiving most of the attention, but Jurrjens is putting together quite a season for the Braves, too. The righthander hasn't allowed an earned run in his past three starts and is 8-3 with a 2.94 ERA.

3 Justin Christian. An outfielder who played his first two professional seasons for the River City Rascals of the independent Frontier League, Christian went 2-for-4 with two RBIs in his debut with the Yankees.

3 DOWN ▼

1 Jose Contreras and Javier Vazquez. In their past eight starts combined, these White Sox pitchers have posted a 2-5 record with an 8.12 ERA while allowing 66 hits in 44½ innings.

2 Padres. Remember how they had climbed out of the N.L. West cellar with excellent pitching and timely hitting—including four consecutive 2-1 victories at one point? Well, interleague play hasn't been kind to the Pads, who are 2-12 against the American League since June 13.

3 Eric Byrnes. The Diamondbacks outfielder hasn't exactly provided an offensive boost. Since his return from a hamstring injury, Byrnes is 2-for-22 with one walk. —*Ryan Fagan*



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A veteran's open-door policy is paving the way for a top rookie to start feeling at home.

Welcome to Buffalo, kid

By Clifton Brown

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Rookies often have trouble adjusting to a new team, new city, new system and new coaches. Not Leodis McKelvin. He feels right at home with the Bills, thanks to a teammate's welcoming gesture.

McKelvin is staying with Donte Whitner, the Bills' starting strong safety. The living arrangement is temporary, until the rookie cornerback finds his own place. But Whitner's decision to roll out the welcome mat speaks volumes about his role as a team leader and how seriously he takes it.

The Bills have made a huge investment in McKelvin, the No. 11 pick in the draft and the first cornerback selected. They expect him to play well right away and to be a cornerstone in their secondary for years. Whitner, in his third season, plans to help McKelvin realize those expectations with hands-on mentoring and motivation.

Call it a good sign for the Bills, that one of their young players is leading a rookie in a positive direction.

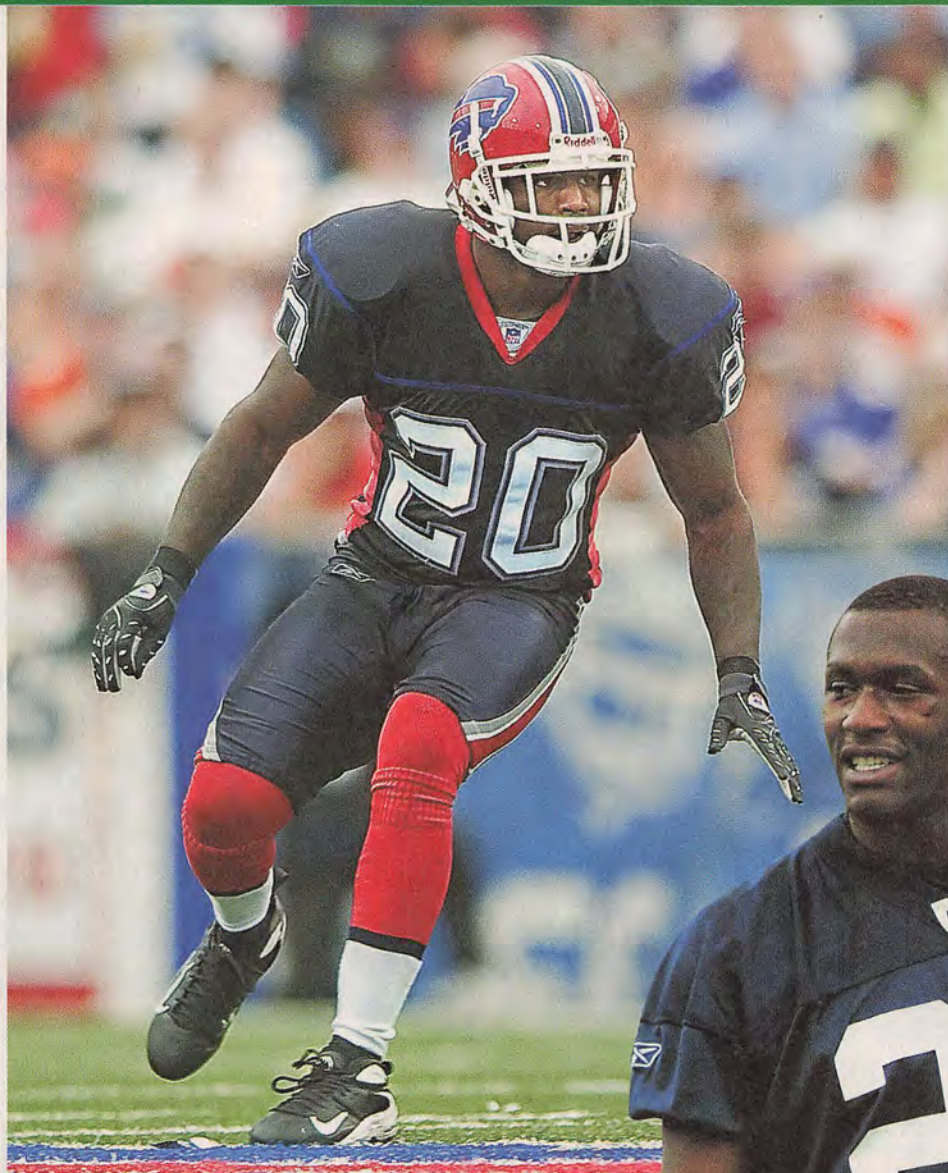
"To succeed in the NFL, it's not only about what you do on the field," says Whitner, who broke into the Bills' starting lineup as a rookie after being selected No. 8 overall in the 2006 draft. "It's the whole package. How much film do you study? How well do you take care of yourself? What choices do you make off the field? It's all part of how successful you become.

"That's why I reached out to Leodis after we drafted him. I'm there for him. He's my new teammate, part of the Bills family, and I want him to do well. The better he plays, the better we'll be. And I'm serious about winning."

When asked if he expects the Bills to make the playoffs, Whitner makes it clear how serious he

Giving someone defensive keys is one thing.

Giving someone the keys to your house is another.



The Bills are counting on McKelvin (right) to contribute immediately. They can rest easier knowing Whitner is showing him the ropes.

is. "Do I expect us to make the playoffs?" he says. "I'm guaranteeing it."

He has delivered that message to McKelvin, who was rated by many scouts as the best cornerback in the draft.

"He drives on the football; he has tremendous opportunity to play in the punt return game," says Mike Mayock, draft analyst for the NFL Network.

"When you watch coaches tape, you can really see the quickness and the change of direction. The only thing he doesn't have is ball skills. He gets his hands on an awful lot of footballs without intercepting them. But I haven't seen him miss a tackle in the tapes I watched."

When McKelvin was drafted, he had no idea Whitner would take such a personal interest in

him. Giving someone defensive keys is one thing. Giving someone the keys to your house is another.

"I was a little surprised when Donte said I could stay with him," says McKelvin, a native of Georgia who played at Troy. "But that shows you what kind of guy he is."

McKelvin and Whitner watch tapes together in the theater in Whitner's basement. Of course, not all of their time is spent focusing on work. They love to play Madden. "Beat him all the time," says Whitner.

Maybe McKelvin is just being a gracious guest. But according to Whitner, they get along famously, listening to the same kind of music, enjoying many of the same television shows. Although McKelvin is the rookie, he is less than two months younger than Whitner.

"Leodis isn't a big talker—he's a doer," says Whitner. "We have the same kind of personality. It works."

Veterans who are team leaders have something to gain by taking an active role in helping rookies get acclimated to the NFL. The quicker the rookies figure it out, the better the team does. And how many stories do we read about players getting in trouble off the field? Whitner believes close bonds between teammates can help avoid that.

"I'm not saying that young guys will never get in trouble if they have vets looking after them," says Whitner. "But having a support system helps. Seeing older guys do the right thing has a tendency to rub off."

Shortly after the Bills open training camp in late July, they will elect team captains for next season. Here's a suggestion for the Bills: Elect Whitner as a captain. Obviously, he is already acting like one. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Players are taking a break before training camp, but we're still following the news. For insight on the latest NFL happenings, read Clifton Brown at sportingnews.com.

WR Brandon Marshall caught 102 passes for 1,325 yards last season, but his inability to avoid trouble has to concern the Broncos. The league has been investigating Marshall's March 6 arrest for allegedly hitting his girlfriend. It was Marshall's third arrest in 12 months. He was charged with driving under the influence in October 2007, and a previous domestic violence charge from March 2007 was dismissed. Though Marshall has proclaimed innocence in the most recent case, his repeated arrests leave him in danger of



Marshall has had one good season—and an awful lot of trouble.

suspension under the NFL's personal conduct policy. This has been a turbulent offseason for Marshall, who has already missed minicamp and OTAs while recovering from a forearm injury suffered while roughhousing with his brother. ➤ The Giants' defensive line gets more publicity, but the O-line of LT **David Diehl**, LG **Rich Seubert**, C **Shaun O'Hara**, RG **Chris Snee** and RT **Kareem McKenzie** is one of the NFL's best. Diehl, Seubert and Snee have received extensions since the Giants won the Super Bowl, so every starter on the unit protecting **Eli Manning** is signed

from the Packers for reasons he has not revealed. Leftwich says he has lost 25 pounds but has been unable to attract serious interest since being released by the Falcons. Considering the leaguewide lack of depth at the position, expect Leftwich and Culpepper to be in uniform before

through at least 2012. ➤ Two free-agent quarterbacks, **Daunte Culpepper** and **Byron Leftwich**, have been working out in different parts of Florida, hoping to sign with a team before training camp. Culpepper turned down a contract offer

Week 1. Once younger quarterbacks struggle during training camp and injuries arise, Leftwich and Culpepper will look more appealing. ➤ The Texans signed free-agent OLB **Rosevelt Colvin**, hoping he'll add veteran leadership to a defense anchored by RE **Mario Williams** and MLB **DeMeco Ryans**. Having won two Super Bowls with the Patriots, Colvin has credibility the younger players respect. Colvin grew up in Indianapolis and considered signing with the Colts but opted for the Texans,

who will try to follow an 8-8 season by making the playoffs for the first time. ➤ TE **Alge Crumpler** and QB **Michael Vick** had superb chemistry when both were Falcons. Now with the Titans, Crumpler hopes to build a similar bond with **Vince**

Young. Crumpler and Young spent extra time working together during minicamps and OTAs, and Young raved about Crumpler's ability to get open. Crumpler has experience playing with a mobile quarterback who ad-libs, which has helped him adjust to Young. The Titans expect Crumpler to play as large a role with them as he did with the Falcons. —SN correspondents

speedreads

Jon Kitna has his golf handicap down to a 6. That might be easier than getting the Lions' win total up to 10.

The October 26 Chargers-Saints game is a hot ticket in London. Too bad the Chargers can't bring the San Diego weather with them.

AFC

Focus on **QUAL**

1 Patriots Tom Brady already had the rings, and now he has the stats (including an NFL-record 50 TD passes). No one is better. Rookie Kevin O'Connell could eventually replace Matt Cassel as the No. 2, but not this year.

2 Colts With his remarkable accuracy and complete mental command of the game, Peyton Manning is right there with Brady—and he has never missed a start. Jim Sorgi has been adequate in his rare opportunities to play.

3 Steelers Ben Roethlisberger took more control of the offense last season, calling all the protection changes and audibles. Veteran backup Charlie Batch can make big plays. Rookie Dennis Dixon is the likely No. 3.

4 Bengals Carson Palmer's combination of accuracy, arm strength, field vision and leadership makes him an elite player. He must improve his ball security. Backup Ryan Fitzpatrick is tough and knows how to avoid pressure.

5 Chargers At the end of last year, Philip Rivers was increasingly productive and limited his mistakes. After ACL surgery in January, he should be completely ready for training camp. Billy Volek is a proven backup.

6 Browns Derek Anderson has a quick release but must improve his completion percentage and reduce his untimely interceptions. Brady Quinn has rare leadership skills and confidence and could step in if Anderson slips.

7 Broncos Jay Cutler has regained the nearly 30 pounds he lost with the onset of diabetes, which left him sapped last season. He must learn to check down more and take fewer chances. Patrick Ramsey is a capable backup.

8 Jaguars David Garrard has excellent mobility and a nice touch on short and



After he turned in a record-setting season to go with his playoff achievements, it's hard to argue with Brady as No. 1.

midrange passes. He is working to improve on deep throws. Both backups, Cleo Lemon and Todd Bouman, have NFL starting experience.

9 Texans Matt Schaub lacks mobility but can get out of jams when necessary and has a strong arm. His inability to avoid hits and injuries is a concern. Sage Rosenfels went 4-1 last season, which means a controversy will be swirling if Schaub gets off to a slow start.

**TOP
5**

1. Tom Brady, Patriots
2. Peyton Manning, Colts
3. Ben Roethlisberger, Steelers
4. Carson Palmer, Bengals
5. Philip Rivers, Chargers

10 Titans Vince Young took a step back last year, so the Titans are trying to fix his footwork, among other things. Young has worked hard and is making progress. Kerry Collins is a capable, experienced backup.

11 Jets Chad Pennington is a savvy veteran who generally manages games well. Kellen Clemens has a stronger arm, but his pocket presence is shaky. Their battle for the starting job will spill into the preseason.

12 Bills Trent Edwards was a revelation as a rookie. He gets rid of the ball quickly and accurately but must improve his ability to read defenses. J.P. Losman's decision making is a big reason he lost the starting job to Edwards.

13 Raiders Strong-armed JaMarcus Russell is still struggling to make up for lost time after a long holdout last summer. His talent far exceeds that of experienced backups Andrew Walter and Marques Tuiasosopo.

14 Ravens Starter Kyle Boller makes poor decisions, especially in the red zone, and has never established himself as a leader. Like Boller, backup Troy Smith has accuracy issues. Rookie Joe Flacco is a year away.

15 Chiefs Brodie Croyle is winless in six starts, but his growth has been slowed by a spotty running game and weak blocking. If he falters, the team could turn to the inexperienced Tyler Thigpen or veteran Damon Huard.

16 Dolphins The competition for the starting job between John Beck and Josh McCown is wide-open. Beck is the more accurate passer, but McCown is bigger, stronger and more experienced. Rookie Chad Henne is the No. 3.

QUARTERBACKS

NFC

1 Cowboys The ability to sense and avoid a rush and throw from different arm slots is what makes Tony Romo an elite playmaker. Backup Brad Johnson is solid; he makes good decisions and few mistakes.

2 Saints Drew Brees is intelligent and instinctive; he acts like a coach on the field. He's accurate on short and deep passes and also can throw on the run. Veteran Mark Brunell knows how to manage a game.

3 Seahawks Like a streak shooter in basketball, Matt Hasselbeck can take over a game as he feeds off his own success. Seneca Wallace and Charlie Frye both have starting experience and will battle for the No. 2 job.

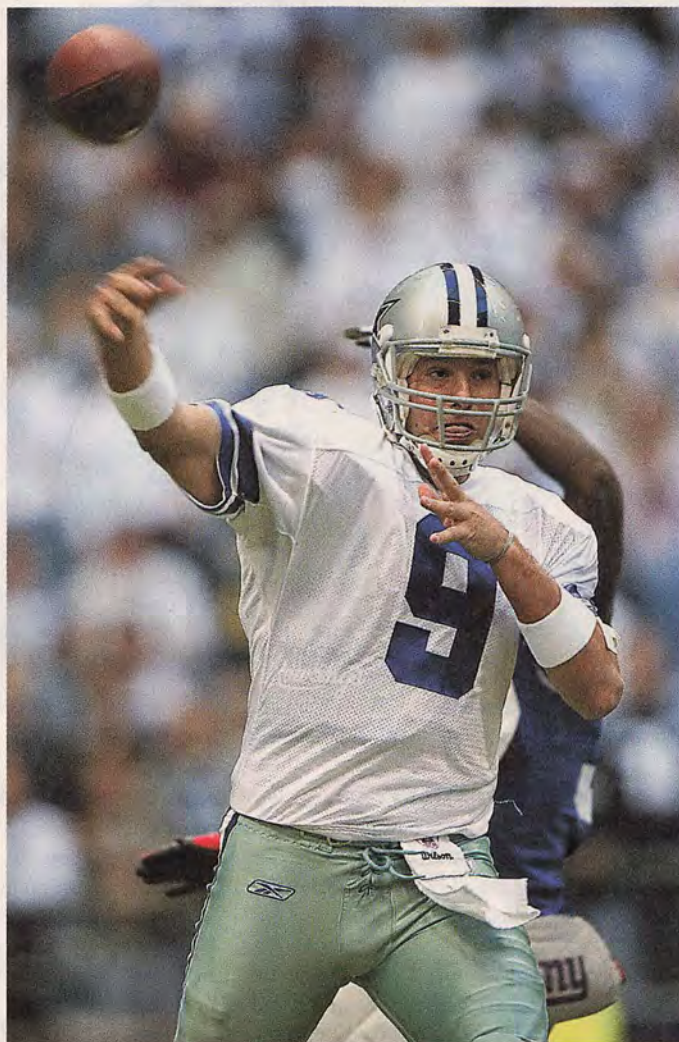
4 Eagles Donovan McNabb has gone from elusive scrambler to mostly a dropback passer. He throws a great deep ball but isn't as adept across the middle. Kevin Kolb is the future starter, and A.J. Feeley can run the offense.

5 Giants Eli Manning is a mentally tough leader who showed he can make plays during last year's Super Bowl run. Newcomer David Carr needs to regain his confidence, and rookie Andre Woodson is a project.

6 Cardinals Matt Leinart is healthy and gets the early call, but he'll be pressed by veteran Kurt Warner, who has the savvy—and the arm—to make the offense click. He can step in if Leinart experiences too many growing pains.

7 Buccaneers Jeff Garcia, 38, still moves well and makes plays on the run. He's accurate and can pick opponents apart if given time. Brian Griese can win games in a pinch, and Luke McCown has the athleticism to make plays.

8 Rams At his best, Marc Bulger is an extremely accurate thrower—one of the game's best pocket passers. But he forced far too



Romo has become the best quarterback in the NFC. Is winning a playoff game next on his list?

many throws in '07. Trent Green will provide quality relief if he avoids concussion problems.

9 Panthers Elbow surgery might limit Jake Delhomme in training camp, but his arm looks strong and he's a proven leader. He needs to stay healthy because the backups, Matt Moore and Brett Basanez, are experienced.

TOP
5

1. Tony Romo, Cowboys
2. Drew Brees, Saints
3. Matt Hasselbeck, Seahawks
4. Donovan McNabb, Eagles
5. Eli Manning, Giants

10 Redskins Jason Campbell has the arm to get the ball downfield but needs to improve his accuracy. Todd Collins showed last year he can be a solid backup, and rookie Colt Brennan will get a shot at the No. 3 role.

11 Lions Jon Kitna is a tough leader but tries to do too much at times and needs to reduce his picks. He may be a better fit in the team's new run-first offense. Drew Stanton and Dan Orlovsky will battle for the backup role.

12 Packers After three years as Brett Favre's backup, Aaron Rodgers knows the offense well. His arm strength has improved and he runs well, but will he be durable enough? It looks like the backup job will go to a rookie—Brian Brohm or Matt Flynn.

13 49ers Alex Smith, who is fully recovered from shoulder surgery, has a better arm and physical ability than challengers Shaun Hill and J.T. O'Sullivan. Hill is a leader; O'Sullivan understands the new offense.

14 Vikings Tarvaris Jackson has a strong arm and good mobility but has been plagued by

injuries and poor decisions. He will benefit from the addition of WR Bernard Berrian. Newcomer Gus Frerotte offers security as a backup.

15 Bears Rex Grossman and Kyle Orton will battle for the starting job. Grossman has been erratic and mistake-prone. Orton isn't a big-time talent, but a good spring might give him a slight edge.

16 Falcons Journeyman Chris Redman could get the early call under new coach Mike Smith. But first-rounder Matt Ryan already knows the offense and needs only to adjust to the speed of the NFL to earn playing time.

INSIDE THE AFC

Jacksonville's Spicer is too tough to be shoved aside

The decision to sign DE Paul Spicer to an extension shows the team may not be ready to hand a starting job to rookie first-round pick Derrick Harvey. Consistently stout against the run, Spicer—one of the toughest players on the roster—has been working to make more of an impact in pass-rushing situations. He matched his career high with $7\frac{1}{2}$ sacks last season.

BALTIMORE The team has been impressed with rookie S Haruki Nakamura, a sixth-round pick who mixed it up with veteran receivers in offseason camps. He changes direction well and has shown a nose for the ball.

BUFFALO RG Brad Butler, who signed a contract extension last week, has good size (6-7, 315), long arms and decent fundamentals. Butler struggles when he plays too high because it limits his strength at the point of attack, but he has long-range potential.

CINCINNATI DE Eric Henderson, who spent 2006 on the practice squad and all of '07 on injured reserve, has returned to his natural position after a trial at outside linebacker, where he struggled in pass coverage. If he can stay healthy, he'll be a factor as a pass rusher in the nickel defense as well as on special teams.

CLEVELAND WR Travis Wilson is under pressure to come through after falling short of even a No. 4 role his first two seasons. He has wrestled with confidence and consistency issues and must prove he has become tougher mentally.

DENVER The team signed Niko Koutouvides to start at middle linebacker, but he shared snaps with Nate Webster, last year's starter on the strong side, in offseason camps. Webster is a hard hitter who should be more effective inside the box.

HOUSTON CB Fred Bennett is coming off a solid rookie season, but he must take a big step this year to become more consistent and stay healthy. The team needs his size, speed and athleticism in the lineup.



A sack machine, Spicer is not—yet. But he's working on it.

INDIANAPOLIS Courtney Roby could provide depth at wide receiver. A third-round pick in 2005, he showed solid skills during offseason workouts and gained the confidence of QB Peyton Manning.

KANSAS CITY Even though the team drafted a defensive tackle in the first round this year and the third round last year, Ron Edwards will keep his starting spot. He plays the run well because he is difficult to clear out of the middle, but he usually comes out on passing downs.

MIAMI WR Greg Camarillo (6-1, 190) has only average size and speed, but he showed progress in the offseason and is one of the most consistent targets on the roster. He makes few mistakes in his routes and has soft hands. He could be the go-to guy in the slot.

NEW ENGLAND This might be the year LB Pierre Woods, who signed with the Pats as an

undrafted free agent in 2006, breaks out. He already is one of the most valuable members on special teams and could get time as a backup outside—he's long and rangy and has a good motor.

NEW YORK CB Justin Miller missed 14 games last year with a knee injury, but the one positive of his rehab is that he spent time on the mental aspect of the game. The coaches think he finally has a chance to blend his athletic ability with a better understanding of his assignments.

OAKLAND The team is giving second-year OT Mario Henderson a long look on the right side, though he is listed behind Cornell Green entering camp. Henderson worked hard during the offseason to improve his technique, strength and knowledge of the position.

PITTSBURGH The Steelers released RB Najeh Davenport, Willie Parker's backup the past two seasons, after they couldn't trade him. And it wasn't just to make room for Mewelde Moore and Rashard Mendenhall. The team didn't want to part with second-year free agent Gary Russell, who it thinks can develop into a top-notch back.

SAN DIEGO Safety could be a pleasant surprise for the Chargers. SS Clinton Hart made strides against the run last season and has added bulk. Eric Weddle, taking over for Marlon McCree at free safety, was sharp in offseason workouts. Weddle likes to hit and proved last year he knows how to play.

TENNESSEE Second-year DE Jacob Ford stood out in offseason workouts after missing last season with a torn Achilles. He is undersized (6-4, 251) but usually is successful because of his speed. Coaches would like for him to play 10 to 15 snaps a game behind RE Kyle Vanden Bosch.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

Many legs would make light work in D.C.

Redskins coaches should find a way to make RB Ladell Betts a bigger part of the team's offense. Betts runs well between the tackles, hits holes quickly and has the power to break tackles and the speed to get into the secondary. If he is given enough carries, he and Clinton Portis each could run for more than 1,000 yards—and the wear and tear on Portis would be less significant.

ARIZONA It won't be a surprise if Tim Castille—who spent last season on the practice squad—starts at fullback over Terrelle Smith. But Smith is a devastating blocker with a ton of experience, so Castille will have to play well in camp to win the job.

ATLANTA Prospect Willie Evans was one of the stars of offseason workouts. Evans excelled at speed rushing from both the left and right sides. He has an above-average first step and is a relentless batter. The Falcons don't have much depth behind DEs John Abraham and Jamaal Anderson.

CAROLINA Even though the Panthers drafted RB Jonathan Stewart, they are expecting more out of RB DeAngelo Williams and will use him more often this year. Williams could make a big impact in the screen game, which the team all but abandoned last season after the quarterback position unraveled.

CHICAGO It was surprising to see the run-first Bears pass on the opportunity to bring in a blocking tight end after veteran John Gilmore departed for Tampa Bay. Neither starter Desmond Clark nor former first-round pick Greg Olsen is a strong blocker.

DALLAS Rookie TE Martellus Bennett has struggled at times picking up the nuances of the Cowboys' offense, but he's working hard to improve. Bennett played in an unsophisticated passing offense at Texas A&M, which could be the cause of some of his problems.

DETROIT WR Devalle Ellis, if he's fully recovered from a knee injury, could be the wild card in Detroit's search for an explosive return man. Ellis—who missed all of last season—is by far the fastest return man the Lions have.

GREEN BAY WR James Jones faded badly in 2007, hitting the rookie wall the final month of the season. He has put in a lot of time in the weight

room this offseason and, though he never has lacked strength, should be better equipped to hang tough for 16 games.

MINNESOTA DE Ray Edwards is penciled in as the starter opposite Jared Allen. Edwards had five sacks last season but was inconsistent. He has the speed, size and talent to excel, though, and has made excellent use of his time all offseason.

NEW ORLEANS Even though they weren't able to land Jeremy Shockey in a draft-day trade, the Saints can still expect a significant upgrade at the tight end position this season. Mark Campbell, their best blocking tight end, is healthy after missing all of last season with a back injury.

NEW YORK With the signing of RG Chris Snee to a six-year, \$43.5 million contract extension, the Giants are in a rare and desirable situation with their offensive line. The entire five-man unit is signed at least through the 2012 season.

PHILADELPHIA Rookie S Quintin Demps has the skill set of most cornerbacks, which is why he'll probably play both positions. A fourth-round pick, he won't outrace any wide receivers or knock anyone's helmet off, but he's outstanding in coverage and has great hands.

ST. LOUIS It's time for CB Tye Hill to show he was worthy of his first-round draft status in 2006. Hill has worked to improve his ball skills and needs to turn some pass breakups into intercep-

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Sean Jensen; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Scott Johnson; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



Betts (above) ran for 1,154 yards in 2006—when Portis was hurt.

tions. He must also improve on his tackling form and avoid lunging for ballcarriers in the open field.

SAN FRANCISCO The 49ers beat out the Rams, Ravens and Patriots to land free-agent RT Barry Sims. Sims, 33, probably isn't as talented as his chief competitor for a starting spot, Jonas Jennings, but Jennings has a history of injuries.

SEATTLE Chris Spencer did all right in his first full season as the Seahawks' starting center, but he was no Robbie Tobeck, who retired after the 2006 season. Making matters worse, Spencer missed all the offseason minicamps while recovering from shoulder surgery. That limited him from working under new offensive line coach Mike Solari.

TAMPA BAY It takes someone special to play strongside linebacker in Monte Kiffin's Tampa 2 scheme, and Cato June is the right kind of special. He's a team-oriented guy who doesn't mind forcing offenses toward the middle of the field, where the playmakers make the majority of tackles.

Was getting a win in court worth piling on its own program?

Duke must learn to fight losing

By Matt Hayes

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If it weren't so utterly humiliating, so mortifyingly accurate, maybe it would be easier to swallow for two of the most competitive men in college football.

As it is, this is what new Duke coach David Cutcliffe and new athletic director Kevin White have walked into: The program is such a laughingstock that its own university doesn't believe in it.

First, let's rewind: Duke attorneys recently argued that the school shouldn't have to pay a \$450,000 cancellation fee to back out of the final three games of a series with Louisville because Louisville could easily find an opponent of "similar stature." Louisville wanted a BCS school because Duke is, as far as we know, a BCS school.

So two weeks ago, in a circuit court in the great state of Kentucky, Duke attorneys argued that the school's football team is the worst in Division I and any replacement team would suffice. And they won.

The reality is, Duke football is horrendous. But why in the world wouldn't Duke president Richard Brodhead—with hope on the horizon—pay the measly \$450,000 instead of embarrassing every member of the team and anyone associated with the program?

If the school's president doesn't believe in the program, why should anyone else? Faced with that—and 22 wins in the past 13 years—White still maintains: "There's no doubt in my mind we can and will be successful in football."

Here's why you should believe him: Wake Forest.

Before Jim Grobe arrived, the Deacons were swirling in the Division I drain with Duke in every sense of the analogy. Not just on the field but with facilities and support and perception.

Then something happened: A no-nonsense coach

with a plan and a purpose changed everything. The Deacs won the ACC in 2006 and could win it again this fall, and the school is in the middle of a six-stage process to renovate BB&T Field.

Cutcliffe has won wherever he has coached; from his years as a loyal assistant at Tennessee to his time as head coach at Ole Miss—where he was 44-29 in the SEC's barren wasteland. White, meanwhile, is among the sport's best administrators and visionaries, a leader within the BCS who many believed



Cutcliffe wins wherever he goes, and it won't be long before he finds a way to put Duke football on the map.

would be the next Pac-10 commissioner.

Instead, he left Notre Dame for Duke—knowing full well that football, at some point, would define his administration. White eventually will have to find a replacement for legendary Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, but that job won't be nearly as difficult as the one he stares down now.

Duke hasn't had a winning season since 1994. The Blue Devils play in a glorified high school stadium in front of a few bodies shy of no one cares. Apparently, not even the school president.

"The days of making excuses are over," Cutcliffe says. So are the days of begging out of contracts. **SN**



Rich Rodriguez continues to recruit quarterbacks to Michigan despite oral commitments from two of the nation's top dual-threat players: **Kevin Newsome** and **Shavodrick Beaver**. Dual-threat stars **Tate Forcier** and **Eugene Smith** have Michigan high on their lists. If incoming freshman QB **Justin Feagin** doesn't win the job this fall or struggles to pick up the system, Rodriguez will sign three quarterbacks in February. ➤ USC RB **Joe McKnight** is on track to complete the required academic work this summer and be eligible this fall. McKnight has been with the team for voluntary workouts and has bulked up to 210 pounds after playing under 200 most of last fall. Offensive coordinator **Steve Sarkisian** wants McKnight more involved in the passing game, and McKnight has spent much of summer workouts in seven-on-seven passing drills. ➤ Alabama coach **Nick Saban** quickly is finding room for his top-ranked recruiting class that started out with 32 members. Senior LB **Jimmy Johns'** arrest and expulsion from the team last week added another spot and left the Tide three over the 85-player scholarship limit with six weeks until the beginning of fall camp.

speedread

Duke isn't the only perennial loser ready to shake free. Baylor stumbled upon a terrific coach when Art Briles decided he could wait no longer for a BCS job and left Houston. His innovative offense and charismatic personality will eventually get Baylor to a bowl game—and land him a better BCS job.



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Brandon Jennings might have a nice time if he goes to Europe. But it won't help him get drafted in 2009.

This flight plan isn't the way to the NBA

By Mike DeCourcy

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Arizona recruit Brandon Jennings is going to go make a million dollars playing hoops in Europe this winter.

While he is there, he will star opposite Dwayne—don't call him The Rock—Johnson in a big-budget action picture and help Luiz Felipe—don't call him Big Phil—Scolari coach Chelsea in its quest to win a Champions League title.

I mean, if we're going to dream, why not dream really big?

Jennings and his people are advancing the notion that instead of participating in NCAA basketball as a freshman he might prefer to spend his one year of waiting to enter the NBA draft as a professional player in Europe. That seems pleasant. Europe can be a bit rainy during the winter, but there's still plenty to see and do. European teams have been known to pay in Euros, which lately is not a bad thing.

It's surprising, though, anyone would believe this would become a lucrative endeavor for Jennings. Or that anyone would believe it would be the correct way for him to pursue becoming a coveted selection in the 2009 draft.

The disconnect starts with the notion there would be a huge market in Europe for a player in Jennings' circumstance. His stated intention is to be drafted in 2009. So why would a European team want to make any sort of investment in him? An agent with extensive experience dealing with European professional teams wouldn't rule out the possibility some rogue owner might take a flier, but he considers it highly unlikely. He explained the money is not as



If Jennings goes to Europe instead of college, he'll make some noise, but he shouldn't expect to be a trendsetter.

NCAA antagonists have convinced a generation of players their time in college basketball is uncompensated, but that's a lie.

loose for American players as when Danny Ferry was lured to Europe after going No. 2 in the 1989 draft.

"The only guarantee with contracts in Europe," the agent says, "is that you're guaranteed not to get all the money you're expecting."

There also is the fact we're talking about Jennings, not LeBron James or Greg Oden or even O.J. Mayo. Jennings is an appealing prospect for Arizona, but he is not nearly as well-

known or established as some of his predecessors. He is a score-first point guard, and European coaches—who tend to be "play the right way" types in the Larry Brown mold—are unlikely to be excited about his style.

About the only way this gets moving is if someone with an anti-NCAA, anti-age minimum agenda subsidizes the deal. Which is not out of the question. But getting Jennings on a team and into some games are different issues. Many teams in Europe are loathe to play even the young home-grown talents who are under contract. French big man Alexis Ajinca averaged 11 minutes a game for Hyeres-Toulon this past winter. Turkish center Omer Asik got about 18 minutes a game for Fenerbahce in Euroleague competition.

Even if Jennings were to find an interested team, sign a lucrative deal, navigate cultural and linguistic barriers, crack his team's lineup and excel on the floor—he's more likely to go 0-for-5 in those pursuits than 5-for-5—this still would not be the best avenue for elite prospects to follow because it takes players away from the consciousness of the American sports fan.

NCAA antagonists have convinced a generation of players their time in college basketball is uncompensated, but that's a lie. Beyond the education, living expenses and high-level training provided to Division I basketball players, Kevin Durant and Carmelo Anthony signed initial contracts with Nike worth a combined \$81 million based on the reputations they both gained in one college season. There would be precious little marketing appeal in a player who had gone from Oak Hill Academy to Europe.

The agent speaking about Jennings' situation says that if college were not available to him, his best option would be to make a deal with an agent that would provide for him to work out for a year with an elite trainer such as Chicago's Tim Grover—somebody NBA folks respect to properly prepare a player to compete in the league.

If Jennings attempts to conquer Europe, chances are good he'll be home shortly after the first jump shot is fired in this insurrection. **SN**



Mike DeCourcy isn't running for office, but he's got news from the nation's capital on the U-18 National Team Trials at sportingnews.com.

Wake Forest's **James Johnson** was one of the best freshman power forwards in the nation last season, but he might lose his spot to one of the Deacons' recruits. Well, not really. It's possible Johnson will move to small forward for a good bit of his playing time and that the Deacs will rotate freshmen **C Tony Woods** and **PF Al-Farouq Aminu** through the post positions along with veterans **Chas McFarland**, **David Weaver** and **Jamie Skeen**. (Skeen won't be eligible until the semester break.) When Wake last won the ACC championship, in 2003, it was the nation's No. 1 rebounding team. This group could move back in that direction. The Deacons also have the flexibility to play a small, quick lineup, with **L.D. Williams** on the wing and **Jeff Teague** and **Ishmael Smith** at guard. After missing the NAAs the past three years, the Deacs should be in position to return in 2009. ➤ New Arizona assistant coach **Mike Dunlap** has already been credited with some serious assisting. Dunlap, who worked as a Denver Nuggets assistant before taking the job under **Lute Olson**, put together information that helped convince rising junior

SF **Chase Budinger** it would be more lucrative in the long term for him to play his way into the high lottery of the 2009 draft. Next year's draft is widely considered to be weak, and Budinger has the talent to deliver a more consistent season in 2008-09. ➤ What's most unusual about Utah's demanding nonconference schedule is that television networks did not arrange any of the games. Coach **Jim Boylen** went out and set this up himself: Oregon, California, at Oklahoma, Gonzaga, LSU. Also included are road games against Missouri State, Idaho State, Utah State and UC Irvine. A former NBA assistant, Boylen learned his scheduling philosophy while working as an assistant coach under **Tom Izzo** at Michigan State. "I don't think we're going to impress anybody by playing teams people know we can beat," Boylen says. ➤ **C Alex Stepheson** was considering transferring to

As a freshman last season, Johnson averaged 14.6 points and 8.1 rebounds for the Deacs.

INSIDE DISH

UCLA as early as last January. But after two years of playing sporadically at North Carolina, he sought assurances of playing time from the Bruins. Having recruited C **J'Mison Morgan** from Dallas to compete for the job, though, it was hard for UCLA to promise anything. Arizona State remains a viable option for Stephenson, who left North Carolina in May and will be eligible in the fall of 2009. ➤ The sleeper recruit in the Pac-10 could turn out to be Washington State SF **Klay Thompson**, son of former NBA player **Mychal Thompson**. Klay was recruited by Pepperdine and Notre Dame in addition to WSU, but several traditional West Coast powers already regret letting him get away. He will have the opportunity to step directly into a rotation that lost stars **Kyle Weaver** and **Derrick Low**. One person with extensive experience on the summer prep scene calls Klay a **Kiki Vandeweghe** clone.

speedreads

The National Association of Basketball Coaches wants its members to refrain from accepting commitments from prospects prior to mid-June the summer before their junior year in high school. It seems like a fine principle, but what if a coach is in position to grab the next Greg Oden or LeBron James earlier?

Lately it seems more coaches leave the Mid-American Conference by getting fired than by getting better jobs, but one reason red-hot Ohio State assistant John Groce accepted the Ohio U. job is Jim Schaus, a rare basketball-saavy athletic director in a sea of football-firsters. Schaus is committed to making the Bobcats a MAC power again, and hiring Groce was a coup.





EXPOSURE

Two heads are better than one

It was the sort of sign language that might have caused somebody to take offense—but in this case, with the Yankees and Mets doing battle in the Bronx, there was nothing but laughs and good cheer. At least we'd like to think so.

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